

PROFESSOR

BERNICE SUMMERFIELD

THE TREE OF LIFE



MARK MICHALOWSKI

BIG
FINISH

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SUMMERFIELD
THE TREE OF LIFE

A Novel by
Mark Michalowski

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Published by Big Finish Productions Ltd.
POBox 1127
Maidenhead SL6 3LW

www.bigjimsh.com

Range Editor: Gary Russell
Managing Editor: Jason Haigh-Ellery

Bernice Summerfield & Joseph the Porter were created by Paul Cornell
Irving Braxiatel was created by Justin Richards
Jason Kane was created by Dave Stone

ISBN 1-84435-152-1

Cover art by Adrian Salmon © 2005
Original design by Clayton Hickman
Logo designed by Paul Vyse

First published June 2005

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Thanks to Steve Tribe

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by Biddies Ltd
www.biddla.co.uk

CONTENTS

Chapter 1	1
Chapter 2	15
Chapter 3	29
Chapter 4	41
Chapter 5	49
Chapter 6	63
Chapter 7	69
Chapter 8	81
Chapter 9	93
Chapter 10	101
Chapter 11	109
Chapter 12	119
Chapter 13	127
Chapter 14	135
Chapter 15	143
Chapter 16	153
Chapter 17	155
Chapter 18	165
Chapter 19	167
Chapter 20	169
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	180

For my dad,
Emil Michalowski

Chapter 1

'Ms Maru?'

The woman leaning over her had close-cropped hair and a grim, smiling face like an over-made-up death's head.

Anghela Maru nodded, and the woman handed her a small, plastic envelope and moved on to the next passenger, checking their name and handing them a similar package.

Anghela popped the seal and tipped the contents - a small, thick booklet, an ID badge and a 'welcome' letter - into her hand. She scanned the letter and booklet briefly: the letter hoped she would have a productive and pleasant time on Tollip's World and gave her details of the accommodation assigned to her in the base. The booklet was a general 'Guide to Tollip's World' - she barely glanced at it; she'd do that later, when she landed.

She reached down, as casually as she could, to the bag tucked beneath her seat and patted it, checking that its contents were still in place. More than anything else about this mission, this was the thing that could trip her up. She'd passed the screening at the Dali Prime station where she'd boarded the shuttle, trying hard not to hold her breath as her bag had been scanned. The military-level hardware and software she'd purchased - at considerable cost, she kept reminding herself - and installed had come with a guarantee that it would do exactly what it said on the packet; and so far it seemed to have worked. The bag had slid through the scanner without the vaguest whiff of alarm bells or rifle barrels.

Still, Anghela knew, she might have to undergo another search when she disembarked at her destination.

The flight from Dali Prime to Tollip's World had taken just over five hours, and she'd spent most of that sleeping and trying to avoid chatting to the passengers either side of her. Fortunately, they'd seemed in as little hurry to wile away the hours in conversation as she had, so everyone had been happy.

The voice of the pilot announced that planetfall would begin in fifteen minutes, and that they were all to make sure they were strapped in. The journey from orbit was rough but uneventful, and Anghela saw the vast ball of the planet materialise through the tissue-thin cloud cover that enveloped it. It was as though someone had taken the planet, dipped it in green goo, and left it to dry. The ship dropped alarmingly, levelling off and taking up a landing path to the research base that Anghela glimpsed briefly, through a ragged hole in the jungle: a lopped-off, grubby white pyramid, a ziggurat with a number of smaller, blockier structures around its base.

And then the shuttle was dropping vertically, its engines screaming, the seat beneath her bucking and shuddering. With a disturbing abruptness, the sound cut out and she felt the shuttle lurch as it touched down on the roof of

the base. There was a chorus of relief from the other passengers; and as the engines whined down, they began to gather their belongings and prepared for disembarkation.

Anghela let the other passengers leave first. She was halfway down the length of the shuttle when the main door hissed open and a wave of warm, damp air rolled in, eliciting another chorus of mutters. As she reached the door, Anghela paused and stared out at the planet: from her vantage point, high atop the base but still well below the jungle's canopy, all she could see was a dense wall of trees of all thicknesses and colours, from cream through to black, spotted with splotches of green and streaks of purple and dark blue. The warmth and weight of the air was almost overpowering, and she grabbed the doorframe to steady herself as she breathed in the heady scent.

With a brief smile at the flight assistant, she took her first steps down onto Tollip's World.

Minutes later, she was crammed into a worryingly rickety lift cage, dropping through the base. She'd expected the inside to be much cooler than the outside, but she was bitterly disappointed. Had these people never heard of air conditioning? She felt warm sweat prickle out all over her skin, making her back itch. The lift stopped and they filed out into a reception area: off-white walls, floor and ceiling, streaked with algal slime and boot-tracks, illuminated by harsh, unforgiving fluorescent strips creating the worst first impression Anghela could imagine. She had to remind herself that she was here for work, not for pleasure. The other newbies milled around for a few moments before an officious young man in sweat-stained dungarees arrived, equipped with an electronic clipboard and a couldn't-care-less attitude to remind them of the way to the accommodation block and the fact that they should already be wearing their ID badges. Anghela clipped hers on, noting the indecent haste with which the others complied with his order: it seemed that even though this was a civilian base, it was being run like a military one, and everyone wanted to be a good little soldier. Not a good omen. Anghela hoiked her bag over her shoulder, checking to make sure everything was in place. She glanced around, wondering if they were going to be scanned or searched again - but it seemed not.

And then the little group of eager newcomers broke up, heading off to their rooms. Anghela hung back, deliberately leaving some space between herself and the people in front of her. She wasn't here to make friends, and until she knew quite what was going on and who she could trust, she didn't want to get too pally with anyone.

She found her room - D20 - easily enough and palmed the doorplate. With a reluctant squeal of rusting bearings, the plastic panel slid aside and she stepped in.

The room was tiny - two single beds, a small table with a couple of drawers underneath, a narrow shelf that ran along one wall just above the heads of the

beds and an open wardrobe were the room's only features, apart from the meagre assortment of bits and pieces that evidently belonged to the room's other occupant.

Just to the right of the main door was another that led into the most minuscule bathroom Anghela had ever seen: a toilet, a shower cubicle and a sink the size of a teacup. The whole place smelt damp and mouldy, and more streaks of green slime festooned one wall, leaking in through a seam in the panels that the whole base seemed to have been constructed from. Shoddy, thought Anghela, stepping back into the bedroom to retrieve her bag. She scanned the room briefly to see if there were any obvious surveillance devices - although she knew that if Hugo Tollip wanted to keep tabs on his staff, he could probably do it without any of them knowing the first thing about it.

She returned to the bathroom, rooting in her rucksack, and pulled out a small, silvery sphere the size of a honey-melon.

'Well Joseph,' she said. 'What the Goddess have I gotten myself into?'

Two days ago

Benny poured a coffee and turned the small, flat package over in her hands.

That, in itself, was a novelty: most of the things she was sent came through the standard artefact couriers who usually delivered during the night. This had been sent via intersystem delivery. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had something normal, something not shrouded in bubble-wrap and null-entropy foam. Fan mail - and, less rarely, hate mail - came intersystem; but it had been a long time since she'd had any of either. She popped the seal and shook the contents into her hand: a tiny, shiny disk and a slip of paper. Hmm. No money or chocolates then. Benny crossed to her terminal and slipped it into the slot, waiting a few seconds for it to power up before accessing it. She unfolded and read the note: Hi Benny - Hope you're *well* Liso Fortuna. That touched a memory. A video window sprang open on screen.

The face was familiar. Not friends-and-family familiar, but next-door-neighbour-who's-always-out-at-work familiar. If she hadn't had Liso's name to go with it, Benny reckoned that the only bells it would have rung would have been more likely found around Wolsey's neck than adorning the cathedral of St Magestine of Cappulah IX.

Seeing Liso's face, Benny's memories of the woman started to come trickling back. Liso had changed from when she and Benny had been on some course or other - paleobotany? - years ago: she'd grown from a slim, awkward girl into a slightly plump, bright-eyed woman. She looked confident and poised, but there was an awkwardness in her demeanour, her body language. As she settled in front of the camera and adjusted something on the desk in front of her, her eyes repeatedly flitted to one side, as if she expected to be caught. In the background Benny could see what looked like a lounge of

some sort - lots of out-of-focus sofas and a dartboard. There were no background sounds.

'Hi there Benny - it's me, Liso! How you doing?'

'Fine thanks,' Benny replied with bemusement.

'Well,' continued Liso, 'I know it's been a few months since we spoke, but I just thought I'd drop you a little message. They're a bit tight on security and what-have-you here, so I probably can't say too much - ' Her eyes darted away again, and with them her smile withered, but blossomed instantly as she looked back at the camera. 'I can probably tell you I'm doing some archaeology work on Tollip's World - not too far from your sector, probably. Nothing much has happened yet.'

No, thought Benny, suddenly catching something awkward and evasive in Liso's face. You're lying: something has happened, hasn't it?

'It's all very warm and very damp here, so we'll be lucky if we find much that hasn't rotted away, but we're always hopeful.' Liso adjusted herself on her seat and cleared her throat, as if she were about to make an important announcement. 'The other day,' she said, staring straight into the camera, 'when I was out having a look around, I was remembering some of the things you taught me at the Academy.' Better memory than I have, thought Benny I never *taught* you at any academy. 'You know what the main one was? The first law of archaeology - I've never forgotten that one.' Lucky you, thought Benny, puzzled. 'It's all about context,' Liso continued. 'I remember you telling us that on our first day, and I'll never forget it.'

As if she'd finished delivering an important message, Liso relaxed a little, her shoulders slumping. 'Anyway, how are you? What you been up to? Got yourself a boyfriend yet?'

Been there, thought Benny. Done that. Got the baby.

'Well,' Liso said suddenly, as if she'd been on the phone for hours and could hear her father telling her to get off because he was the one who paid the bills, 'sorry I haven't got more news for you. You'll have to see if you can get yourself a job here or something. You'd enjoy it. It'd be just like the old times! Anyways, I'd better go - glad the disk and everything got to you, although of course if it didn't, then you won't see me telling you this! Take care Benny! Big hugs!'

Liso reached forwards - after another glance around - and cut the recording. Benny sat in silence for a few minutes, staring at the Collection logo, spinning gaudily around on *the* screen.

What the hell had that been about? She'd hardly spent more than a few hours with her on the paleobotany course, and sure as anything couldn't remember 'teaching' her about 'the first law of archaeology'. It was true - context was almost everything where archaeology was concerned; but it was news to her that it had been codified as an actual law. Maybe, unknown to her, they'd started calling it 'Summerfield's Law' after her. (She made a mental

note to get Joseph to check up on copyright law.) But other than that bit of babble, what had been the point of sending her the message at all?

She ejected the disk and turned it over and over in her hands, wondering if there was something else to it, some other, secret message. But, visibly at least, it looked just like any old data disk, with a hand-scribbled 'To Benny' on the label. She popped it back into the terminal and checked it for other files, viruses, worms, maggots, ferrets and whatnots, but it came up clean.

'Joseph,' she called across the room to where her AI sat on the coffee table.

'Yes Bernice?'

'This disk - the one in the terminal. Can you do some sort of fancy scan on it?'

'What am I looking for?'

'I dunno - something. Anything. Anything other than Liso's message.'

Joseph chirruped and she heard a soft whirr from the terminal as the drive was accessed.

'Apologies Bernice,' said Joseph. 'The message file is the only thing on the disk.'

'Hmm... could she have encoded something clever into the message file itself? Something subliminal?'

'I shall check....'

Benny drummed her fingers on the table for a few moments, and checked the inside of the package in which the disk had arrived in case she'd missed something - and found nothing.

'No,' said Joseph presently. 'The file appears to be exactly what it purports to be.'

Benny's shoulders slumped. What was all this about? And where in the galaxy was Tollip's World? She asked Joseph - and had to interrupt his string of meaningless galactic coordinates almost instantly.

'English, please, Joseph.'

'It's approximately one hundred and eighty light years from here - this side of the Bloomingdale Nebula. Would you like me to access full planetary data?'

'Not just now, thanks Joseph. D'you think she wants me to go there? That she's in trouble?'

'It is a possibility.'

Benny got up and began pacing the room.

'Why me, though? Because I knew her years ago? Because I'm a famous archaeologist?'

Joseph gave a thoughtful - if slightly sneery-sounding - hmmm.

'Well it can't be because we're bosom buddies, can it?'

Benny flopped down on the sofa but couldn't settle, and was up on her feet making another pot of coffee a few seconds later.

'And anyway,' she said, 'there's no way I could go, is there? Not with having to take care of Peter.'

'I was under the impression,' offered Joseph, 'that the majority of Peter's care was being undertaken by Jason and Adrian and -'

'No!' shrieked Benny indignantly, whirling round with a mug of coffee in her hand and slopping it all over the floor. 'They're just helping out as well you know - and don't you go giving me one of your little hmmms, thank you very much. It's teamwork, bringing up a child - it's the best way. I don't want Peter to grow up with some outmoded, sexist model of his parents - of his mother - in his head: I want him to grow up as a normal, balanced kid, realising that childcare is the responsibility of both parents.' There was, of course, the fact that Peter could, if you chose to look at it in a particular way, be considered to have - at last count - four parents. Sort of. Although there was at least one of those who she didn't want reading him bedtime stories and tucking him in. At least.

She stared at Joseph until she was sure he wasn't going to hmmm again.

'So that's that,' she said firmly, having put Joseph in his place. 'I know where my priorities lie, and they're most definitely here with my son.'

'There's another package for you,' said Ms Jones with the tight little face she reserved for lecturing her about drinking or partying or any of the other dozen things that Ms Jones didn't think befitted the mother of a two year-old. The hint of a stress on 'another' left Benny in no doubt that Ms Jones considered the arrival of two packages in as many days a rare and highly suspicious occurrence. The worst thing was, Benny realised as she smiled her most radiant smile, that she was actually feeling guilty about getting post. Only Ms Jones could make her feel guilty about getting post.

She held out her hand, but Ms Jones simply let her eyes drift to the edge of the desk where a small, plastifoil-wrapped box sat.

'It's not Christmas already, is it?' Benny asked, leaning over the desk. 'Two in two days. I must have a secret admirer. Valentine's Day perhaps?' She picked up the package, and turned it over in her hands.

Ms Jones paused in her work and consulted a desk calendar.

'On Uhlala it's the Festival of the Unrepentant Whores,' she said helpfully.

'Oh,' smiled Benny tightly. 'Must be that, then.'

Ms Jones almost imperceptibly raised an eyebrow and returned to scribbling tiny little words on a huge sheet of paper. Benny nodded her thanks and headed back to her quarters, examining the package as she went. Overnight courier, she noted. Must be really important - even more so than Liso's message yesterday. And it must have cost an arm, a leg and a tentacle to get this to her. Experimentally, she raised the package to her ear and rattled it. Nada. She didn't expect to find chocolate in this one, either. Why did no one send her chocolate? Not even antique chocolate, just excavated from the chocolate ruins of Chocopolis on Chocolax IV. She wasn't fussy. Milk or plain. Whatever.

Once in her room - and having noted that Joseph was sitting by her terminal, humming quietly to himself as if he knew what was coming - she opened the package to find another data disk. A follow-up message from Liso? This one had no note with it. She popped it into the terminal and sat back, waiting for it to be healthchecked. The screen flashed.

'It's another video file,' said Joseph.

So it probably was Liso again. Was the woman stalking her?

So Benny was surprised to see the face of a man in his thirties - the rather bleak and singularly unattractive face of a man in his thirties, all dimples and unshavenness and tiredness in the eyes - looking at her from the screen.

'Professor Summerfield,' he said, his voice heavily accented. 'Bernice. You don't know me - my name's Piotr Volkov. I'm a friend of Liso Fortuna. She talked of you a lot.' Not only did that sound very unlikely, thought Benny, it sounded even more past tense. 'I thought you were the best person to -' Piotr broke off and glanced over his shoulder, edgy, as if he expected to be interrupted at any moment, just like Liso had done. 'Sorry,' he apologised with an awkward smile. 'I thought you were the best person to contact. I don't know how to get in touch with Liso's family, and... I just thought you were the...' He paused and ran his hand through the dark stubble of his hair. 'Something's happened to Liso. She's disappeared.' The way he emphasised the word made Benny's throat dry and she leaned in to the screen a little more. 'No one knows whether she has had an accident or... or what's happened. But just before she went, she told me she'd discovered something.' Piotr paused again. 'I've attached a file giving details of Tollip's World - where we are.' Piotr leaned closer to the camera and Benny felt uncomfortably intimate - and pulled back from her own terminal. 'Please,' said Piotr. 'If you can, come to Tollip's World. Please review the material on the disk and see what you think. Liso would have appreciated it.' He looked over his shoulder yet again, and Benny could see his hands move forwards, as if he were about to switch the camera off. Whatever Piotr had expected to happen didn't, and he seemed to relax a little. 'This place makes you a bit edgy,' he said to the camera. 'Liso was a friend of mine here - we're researchers employed by Hugo Tollip - you may have heard of him? Well, something odd is going on here. Liso was convinced it was big. And now she's gone missing and everyone's saying "the jungle claimed her."'

He shook his head. 'Whatever they mean by that. Please, if you can come, come!' He paused again. 'My apologies that this is all so vague, but... you know.' No, thought Benny, feeling frustrated by the tone of Piotr's message, I don't know. Why can't you tell me?

'I have included some references and details that should make it easy for you to get onto the next research team - which should be due to set off from Dali Prime about two days from when you receive this.' He gave a dry chuckle but there was no humour in his eyes. 'Assuming that this package gets to you

about two days before the research team sets off. I hope you can come.' The message closed with a bungled bit of thanking her and hoping to see her soon.

'So...,' Benny said to the silver sphere sitting on her desk. 'Thoughts?'

'I believe that you should spend more time with Peter first thing in the morning - Jason has indicated that, in his own words, he's not "a morning person" and that-'

'Whoa! Whoa!' cried Benny. 'Back up a second Joseph. Where's all that come from?'

'You asked after my thoughts, Bernice.'

'I asked after your thoughts on this message from Piotr, you oaf!' Benny felt her cheeks flushing.

'My apologies,' said Joseph smoothly. 'Are you asking whether I would recommend following up on Piotr's message?'

'Not a "morning person"? Benny wasn't listening. 'He's not a morning-noon-or-night person when it comes to doing anything responsible. When did he say this? Did he tell you this?'

'I believe he was talking to Adrian.'

Benny threw her hands up.

'Oh great! They're talking behind my back now, are they? And what did they say about me? Slagging off my parenting skills, were they? Saying that I was never up early enough to get Peter bathed and fed? Is that what they were saying?' Benny was fuming.

'I don't believe that your name was mentioned in the conversation in question,' Joseph replied.

'Oh!' cried Benny, now even more angry. 'So I don't even get to feature in a discussion about my son's - my son's - future! Is that it?' She banged her fist down on the desk and Joseph jumped. Literally.

'The discussion,' replied Joseph, sounding almost as though he were gritting non-existent (or at least tiny and metal) teeth, 'was initiated by Jason when he expressed ignorance of what Peter had been given for breakfast the previous day, and whether he would notice if Jason gave him the same thing two days running. There was no explicit or implicit criticism of you.'

'I bet there wasn't,' hissed Benny, squinting at Joseph through narrowed eyes. 'I bloody bet there wasn't.'

There was an awkward pause before Joseph said quietly: 'Would you now like my thoughts about Piotr's message?'

Benny nodded thoughtfully and rubbed her chin. Anything to take her thoughts off Jason and his back-stabbing comments to Adrian. Typical men - couldn't just come out and have an adult discussion about something: had to go whispering and bleating about her behind her back.

'I feel that your attention has wandered,' she heard Joseph say archly.

'No, no, I'm listening. Go on...'

'There is clearly something happening on Tollip's World that neither of them wished - or were able - to speak of openly. I am currently collating all the data I can find on the planet, but I've found nothing, yet, that would warrant a trip there.'

'Really?' Benny felt strangely disappointed. It had been a while since she'd been away from the Collection - and even longer since she'd had a mystery greater than 'What happened to Peter's favourite blanket?' to solve (it had turned up lagging a thermal inverter in the climate control equipment for Benny's quarters: Jason and Adrian had disclaimed all knowledge of it, but there were suspicious-looking, claw-sized tear marks in it, and Benny had to remind herself that Killorans didn't have the same sentimental attachment to baby things that humans did. Well, some humans. Not her, of course. That would be just silly - it was only a blanket, for Goddess' sake.) 'Nothing at all?'

'I am still interrogating several data sources, but I'm not hopeful of success.'

Benny sighed.

'Would the credentials or whatever Piotr supplied... would they fool the authorities there and get me in?'

'They would almost fool me, Bernice.'

'Must be good. Couldn't I, um, just go as myself?'

'Piotr seemed to think that that was unwise. Your name is fairly well known in this sector, Bernice.'

She paused, mulling it all over. If she was as well known as Joseph seemed to think (and, of course, why shouldn't she be?) then she'd be recognised on sight, wouldn't she? Of course, since the docudrama about her work had fallen through (what was wrong with wanting her own dresser and make-up artist? Along, of course, with script approval and an unlimited mini-bar) it was quite possible that her face wasn't quite as well known as it could have been....

Benny shook her head: this was madness. She had a child to look after (and a breakfast menu to draw up), responsibilities, papers to write, artefacts to examine - she glanced around her quarters. Washing up to do. Of course she couldn't go! Haring across space after some lost woman that she barely remembered, at the bequest of a skanky-looking man she'd never met. Utter madness!

'When you have a moment,' she said casually, a few seconds later. 'Can you check my diary for the next few -'

'Nothing that can't be rescheduled,' he answered with a promptness that made her wonder whether he'd started reading her thoughts.

'Joseph,' Benny said slowly. 'Can I reprogramme you to be less efficient, d'you think?'

'You could,' Joseph replied hesitantly. 'But I would not recommend it.'

'Why not?'

'Because then I might forget to remind you about important meetings - like the one with Mr Braxiatel that you are in imminent danger of being late for.'

'Bums!' said Benny, leaping out of her seat and haring for the door. When you've been pestering your boss for a funding meeting for three weeks, it doesn't look good to be late for it.

Well, thought Benny as she strolled cheerily out of Brax's office. That was a piece of -

'Benny!'

Jason was suddenly there in her face. Even Jason - in her face - couldn't diminish the good feeling she was currently radiating. Brax must have been in a particularly good mood to have agreed to the list of important and expensive acquisitions that she'd dragged out of the back of her memory on the spur of the moment. She almost gave Jason a hug.

'And how's my favourite co-parent today?'

'Your favourite co-parent is getting increasingly hacked off with your other favourite co-parent, who seems convinced that a diet of raw meat would be good for our son.'

'Adrian?'

Jason peered ostentatiously up and down the corridor. 'Unless you happen to have another co-parent hidden away somewhere, yes!'

She waved away his concerns.

'Just remind him that Peter's teeth haven't quite developed to *the* point where he can dismember a gazelle, yet.'

'You tell him.'

Benny looked askance at him.

'And here's me thinking that you had Adrian well in hand. That *was* what you said to me the other day wasn't it?' She made a pretence of dredging her memory for the exact quote. "'Why you need that big dog to help raise our son, I'll never know.'" Weren't they your words? Never mind the inaccuracy of them - or the blatant speciesism - Jason, I never had you down as someone that needed to come running to me for help. Well, not recently.'

Jason glowered at her, sensing the corner into which Benny was so expertly manoeuvring him.

'I'm not running to you,' he protested. 'I just think you need to lay down some guidelines, set some boundaries.'

'For you or for Adrian?'

'For all of us! For God's sake, Benny, Peter's our baby - and no, don't start on who the genetic father is. I've spent much more time with Peter than Adrian has. It's me that Peter thinks of as "daddy".'

Benny shifted her weight onto one hip.

'So what you're saying is that you can't have it out, man-to-erm-Killoran, with Adrian and sort it all out between you like grown adults?' She sighed

theatrically. 'Honestly, Jason! If you really need me to come and sort out your disputes, then fine.'

Jason growled. Almost literally. He raised his hands.

'Okay, okay, I surrender. Happy now? Leave it with me.' He turned to go. 'But if you find Peter coughing up cat fur at breakfast tomorrow, don't say I didn't warn you.'

He stormed off down the corridor, shaking his head.

Benny! she congratulated herself. *You've still got it!*

Unfortunately, Ms Jones wasn't quite so convinced that Benny 'had it'.

She was still laboriously entering things on her big piece of paper when Benny leaned over her desk and asked, casually, when the next shuttle to Dali Prime was leaving the Collection.

Ms Jones's hair had always seemed so tightly pulled back that any movement of her facial features looked like a magic trick. Nonetheless, Ms Jones's eyebrows managed to elevate themselves as though they were oddly shaped caterpillars shuffling sideways up her forehead.

'And why would you want to know that?'

'Because it's one of the nearest main spaceports to here.'

'And why would you want a spaceport?'

Benny felt herself tensing up. Ms Jones was developing an irritating tendency to forget that she was here to support the Collection's staff, to type up memos and reports, to organise meetings and events, and to organise travel. Not to make her feel like she was a schoolgirl wanting to know where she could get a cigarette.

'Because,' she said pointedly, 'I might, quite possibly at some point in the near future, like to take a trip.' She anticipated Ms Jones's next question instantly. 'To go somewhere.'

'Is that entirely appropriate?' Ms Jones asked, starting to tap at her keyboard with the air of someone who thinks it might suddenly bite her.

'I'm sorry,' Benny feigned confusion. 'Appropriate?'

'Not that it's really any of my business, but Mr Kane and Mr Wall were in the corridor earlier on,' she said, continuing not to look at Benny, 'arguing about young Peter's eating habits. I would have thought that, as Peter's mother, your priorities would have been clear.'

Benny's eyes widened. She and Ms Jones had been getting surprisingly close recently, certainly since the invasion by the Fifth Axis. But this felt like something new, something a little bit worrying. She opened her mouth to say words that she hoped she'd really, really instantly regret, but before the stream of invective, festering nicely inside, could spew forth, she heard Brax's voice over her shoulder.

'Everything okay Benny? Ms Jones?'

Benny clamped her mouth shut, turned and beamed her beamiest smile.

'Fine, thanks. Me and Ms Jones were just discussing childcare. Ms Jones is such a font of wisdom when it comes to looking after children. She's clearly been leafing through the latest copy of Panicky Parent magazine. She was just about to book me a flight to Dali Prime - weren't you, Ms Jones?'

Ms Jones looked up, her eyes hard.

'Certainly Professor Summerfield. When did you want to travel?'

Benny flashed her a somewhat-less-than-beamy smile.

'As soon as is humanly possible, Ms Jones. If that's all right.'

On the face of it, it seemed absurdly simple: Benny was now Anghela Maru, an archaeologist specialising in pre-technological civilisations, freelancing for one of the big agencies. She had - according to her new CV - eight years' experience exploring the Outer Worlds of the Inner Zone (or something - Benny felt she really ought to take some time out of the journey to memorise this stuff: it might be important later) with commendations for her work on Pallusis. At least she'd heard of Pallusis. Sort of. In a bar, somewhere. Benny-whoops, Anghela - would rendezvous with the Zata at Dali Prime and be whisked off to Tollip's World where she'd join the rest of the research team.

Ms Jones, whatever else her faults - and boy, thought Benny, were there a lot of them - was very good at what she did. Obviously, Piotr's contact had already checked out connecting flights, and so it didn't come as that much of a surprise that Ms Jones had discovered that a shuttle was leaving the Collection for Dali Prime that very evening, and had booked her a seat. Brax, showing his customary discretion, hadn't asked where she was going. At least one person around here treated her like an adult, not a fifteen-year-old.

As her flaming temper faded to glowing embers, she'd headed back to her quarters to find out if Joseph had discovered anything else about her destination - or its owner.

Hugo Tollip was, he'd discovered, one of the sector's richest men, his wealth accumulated by the adroit acquisition of planets considered too difficult to mine or colonise by anyone else. Tollip's World (he tended to name them after himself when he first purchased them), it seemed, was one huge, festering, squelching jungle, with plantlife so tenacious that only the Galyari or the Sasoons would have touched it with a bargepole. His previous acquisitions had netted him a fortune after a serendipitous discovery of electrohaptic deposits on some moon or other had given him the capital to buy a host of other superficially useless worlds.

He had his own permanent retinue of staff, but hired in others, usually agency staff, for particularly projects - which, Benny presumed, accounted for Liso's presence there. There were no hints of Tollip's being a dodgy character in what Joseph had discovered - but then businessmen were good at airbrushing out their less-than-salubrious pasts (and presents), weren't they?

But what if Liso had found something out about either him or the planet -

something that had disappeared her, or give other people reason to *make* her disappear? Were she and Piotr becoming paranoid? She wasn't totally convinced that Liso hadn't simply gone out for a brisk walk after breakfast and got herself lost. It happened all the time to archaeologists. Well, other archaeologists.

But there was something in Liso's message - something that set her radar twitching (nope - radar bleeped, didn't it. Or pinged. Note to self: find out these things.).

Information on Tollip's World was, as Joseph had discovered, hard to come by, even through the extensive networks that Braxiatel had access to. She knew that such commercially sensitive data was considered highly classified until new planets' owners had decided what to do with their acquisitions. All she'd been able to find out was that it was classed, rather unscientifically, as a 'jungle planet'. And it was a while - she reminded herself, as she found herself running through a mental checklist of what, exactly, she might need for a journey to a jungle planet - since she'd been in a jungle. All those beautiful birds and cute little monkeys. Not to mention the warmth and the sunshine. And the monkeys. The cute ones, with their little button eyes and their clever little ways. Oh, and the sunshine.

Bugger! thought Benny and realised that she probably needed some new holiday knickers. She pulled a handful out of her drawer.

Khaki *green* or dishwater *grey*?

And people thought being an archaeologist was easy.

Chapter 2

'Well Joseph,' said Benny again. 'Now what?'

'Please be more specific,' said Joseph.

She had a momentary flash of concern about him - but it was too late to have second thoughts: the contract, forwarded to Benny by Piotr's friend, had specifically said 'No AIs with machine intelligence rating 20 or above'. She'd had to ask Joseph how high he was rated - 45, apparently - and then work out clever, tricky ways in which he could seem more stupid than he actually was. Now, if it had been Jason she'd been smuggling in in her bag, there wouldn't have been a problem - he managed that kind of thing in his sleep. As it was, Joseph had had to disable some of his upgrades, lose some of his memory and processing power, and - more importantly - install some very illegal bits of ex-military software that, so Benny was assured, would allow him to pass anything short of a full disassembly with flying colours. She gave him a little squeeze, and hoped that his newfound fake stupidity wouldn't embarrass her later.

'Don't worry about it,' she said reassuringly.

'I won't,' Joseph replied, 'however please be aware that any apparent downgrading of my intelligence is simply that: apparent. I am perfectly capable of holding a conversation with you - I simply require you to be more specific in the wording of your questions.'

'Oh!' said Benny, feeling just a little smaller. 'Right. Okay. Um, now what should we do?'

'I suggest you perform some sort of reconnaissance whilst I passively scan radio and data networks.'

'It's a plan,' Benny agreed, feeling that whilst it was certainly that, it was a little vague on the specifics. Still, she liked vague. It was easier not to notice when things were going wrong.

She returned Joseph to her bag and stepped back into the bedroom, feeling a sudden wave of depression: it was muggy and damp and smelled of old flannels, and she could feel her shirt sticking to her back and her trousers clinging to the sweaty backs of her knees.

Still, it was a jungle planet, which meant sunshine. Sunshine and monkeys. With button eyes.

A short, brisk-looking woman in a smart grey and blue uniform clapped her hands and everyone turned. She scanned them with narrowed eyes, as if weighing them up, and nodded briefly to herself. Benny's 'welcome' letter had told her to be in conference room two at 1800 hours, just an hour after her arrival. It seemed a bit mean - no chance for a quick jacuzzi, a massage or a poke around the mini-bar. Oops. No mini-bar. Oh well. She expected there'd

be complimentary drinks laid on at the 'getting to know you' meeting.

There weren't. Just a dozen other newbies, all looking vaguely lost and disappointed. Probably the mini-bar problem again. And, of course, there was Bleize.

'Name's Bleize,' the woman barked. 'No first name that you need to bother with - just Bleize'll do - call me "sir" if you feel you really need to.' There was no humour in the short, sharp smile that she flicked on and off. 'I'll be your liaison here until you all get sorted.' She passed out copies of another small booklet that everyone began to hungrily thumb through. Benny just glanced at the cover and then back at Bleize. Ex-military, reckoned Benny. Which didn't bode well for the level of security that Hugo Tollip thought was necessary.

Bleize had short, wavy hair, chestnut brown and *very* much under control - so much under control, thought Benny, that she was surprised it wasn't doing press-ups on her head as she spoke. Her eyes were sharp and grey and flitted from face to face constantly. A woman, thought Benny, who probably never forgot a name or a face. Not someone to get on the wrong side of. Especially if the name and face you were using weren't actually yours. She wondered if, out there in the galaxy somewhere, there was a *real* Anghela Maru, and what the current penalties were for identity theft.

'This'll give you the basics,' Bleize was continuing her lecture. 'It's now 1820 hours. We run on a twenty-six-hour clock here to match local conditions, so you'll be feeling odd for the first week or so. See the doc if you need some pills or jabs or whatever. You're not in the army here,' Bleize said, her diction belying her words, 'but it doesn't do any harm to follow company rules. Read the book. Get a good night's sleep. Get to work at oh-eight-hundred. Any problems?'

Lots of shaking heads. Benny realised that hers was one of them.

'Good. See you all later.' Another twitch of a smile and Bleize marched out of the room.

Benny returned to her quarters - sixteenth would have been more appropriate - feeling vaguely restless. She was here for a purpose and, in the absence (and the booklet that Bleize had handed out had made it quite clear that an absence of such facilities was what the base had in abundance) of any of the facilities of a top-class hotel, she thought she might as well get on and do something about fulfilling it.

Her roommate was a youngish woman, judging by the clothes, although they were all rather green and shapeless (her own choice of khaki knickers had been, Benny thought, inspired). She pulled Joseph out and set him on the shelf that ran along the wall at the head of the bed.

'Okay?' she asked.

'Everything is fine,' he replied. 'I have detected low-level comms traffic throughout the base - although offworld comms ceased thirty-seven minutes

ago. I have been running in stealth mode to prevent detection. If you would prefer, I can enter active scan mode to -'

'No, no,' Benny interrupted. 'Not just yet. Let's keep your presence here a secret as long as we can. We don't know when we might need the element of surprise. Um, what was that bit about offworld comms?'

'Thirty-seven minutes ago, offworld comms ceased - there appears to have been an official blackout.'

'Any idea why?' Benny felt sure that it wasn't her own ego whispering to her that it might just, possibly, be because of her.

'The quoted reason is security,' Joseph replied, not setting her mind at ease at all. Had she gone through all that rigmarole with the false identity only to be caught the moment she arrived?

Benny drummed out a nervous rhythm on her thighs.

'Is there anything else?' Joseph asked, breaking the silence.

'Not that I can think of, thanks Joseph.'

'Very well. I'll put myself into sleep mode until my services are required.'

'You do that, Joseph. Sweet dreams.'

She finished her unpacking, stowed her case in the top of the wardrobe, and freshened herself up with a quick hand-wash, wondering where the controls for the air conditioning were. Very quickly she realised that there weren't any. Hmph.

The door hissed whilst she was towelling her hair, and an incredibly small woman, with dark skin and disturbingly wide-set eyes that made her look like a cartoon character, bundled in, already unzipping her coveralls. She stopped sharply as she saw Benny.

'Oh!' she said, her deep voice at odds with her elfin build.

'Hi,' said Benny, stepping forward with her hand outstretched, remembering her new name at the last minute. 'I'm Anghela. Anghela Maru.'

The woman took her hand and shook vigorously.

'Janny,' she said. 'Janny Mwesto.'

'Sefrn?' asked Benny, making sure there was no hint of a vowel sound before the final 'n'. The Sefrn were very prickly about the inability of other humans to pronounce their name properly. Janny raised her eyebrows, looking suitably impressed.

'Believe it or not, you're the first one here that's said it properly.'

Benny shrugged the compliment off nonchalantly. 'Archaeologist,' she said blithely. 'Languages come with the territory. Although if you'd been K'melian or Xhosa, I'd have been stuffed! I mean, what kind of a language considers ! to be a consonant?'

Janny laughed and pushed her sweat-matted locks back from her wide forehead.

'Just arrived? Your skin looks too good!'

Benny nodded and discreetly turned away to fiddle with something in her

bag as Janny stripped out of her sweated clothes.

'Oh, don't bother on my account,' she said, clearly sensing Benny's embarrassment. 'When we're not working, we tend to wear as little clothing as is decent. Watch out for some of the guys in maintenance: their decency threshold's pretty low when it comes to clothing.'

Benny grinned, flopping down on the bed. 'Don't they do air con or dehumidifiers around here?'

Janny was now clad in just pants and snatched up a towel as she headed for the shower.

'This is as good as it gets, I'm afraid.' She waved towards a set of vents in the ceiling. 'But airborne algae keep clogging them up. And then Legionnaire's decided to set up home in some of the drip tanks. Tollip had a load of techies in the other week trying to sort it all out, but I reckon they've made it worse.' She shook her head resignedly. 'So half the time it's out of action whilst they clean the system out, and the rest of the time it's hardly worth bothering with anyway. You get used to it. Won't be a sec.'

She was about twenty of them - and then she was out, towel around her waist, a second one scrubbing at her hair.

'So,' she said, looking Benny up and down. 'Archaeologist, eh? Drew the short straw, did you?'

'Sorry?'

Janny's mouth formed a silent 'o'.

'Right... not told you, then?'

'Told me what?'

'Keep losing 'em. Archaeologists. Exaggeration: one so far.'

'Really?' Benny tried to look worried, rather than intrigued.

'A woman. Liso, I think her name was.'

'What happened to her, then?'

Janny shrugged.

'Not my field, really - I'm in geology. But I heard she went off on her own little field trip and *poof*. Just vanished.'

'Goddess,' said Benny, trying to sound shocked, like this was the first she'd heard of Liso's disappearance. After a couple of seconds of slightly over-the-top head-shaking, she gave a sigh. 'So what's there to know about Tollip's World?' A change of subject seemed about right at this point: she didn't want to look too concerned with a missing woman that she'd never heard of.

'Just call it Tollip, everyone else does. Or swamp-ball. I hear they're working on a new name - apparently that's what Hugo Tollip does: calls 'em all "Tollip's World" until he either flogs 'em off or gives 'em proper names.' She pulled a face. 'So it'll be something naff like Verdana or Chloros or Broccoli - something like that.'

'And from a geological viewpoint?'

Janny narrowed her eyes. 'What level we talking? Expert? Novice?'

Benny indicated a level about knee-high.

'O...kay. Pretty much Earthlike gravitywise, as you might have noticed. Atmosphere too: slightly higher in oxygen. One small moon, liquid core. Fairly small equatorial ocean that's pretty much an algae incubator. More technical?'

Benny raised a hand.

'That'll do for me. What about indigenous life?'

'Apart from the plants and the microbes and a pitifully small collection of insects? Zilch. Nada.'

Benny frowned.

'Not that I'm much of a zoologist, but isn't that a bit weird?'

'Too right - got everyone puzzled, although there's rumours that there *were* animals here, but something killed them all off.'

Benny felt her skin prickle again, but this time it wasn't sweat. Okay, it wasn't just sweat.

'And that something,' Benny ventured. 'Um, still around is it? Still, erm... killing?'

Janny shook her head.

'The word is that it was a virus. Years ago. I mean, they'd hardly let us go running around out there if there was any danger, would they?'

Benny smiled at Janny's naivete. *Course they wouldn't*, she thought, as Janny struggled into her pants. *Billionaire businessman running a research base like a secret military op? Our safety will be his first concern.*

Once Janny had dressed, she took a decidedly clammy Benny along to the refectory to show her around. The room was wide and low, overlit by soulless fluorescent panels that failed even to make Janny's dark skin look healthy. She seemed to know a few people, exchanging brief winks and grins and flirtations with half the people there, introducing Benny to each and every one of them before they joined the food queue.

'So what made you come here?' Janny asked as they picked out surprisingly unappetising-looking food. Benny scowled silently at it: the base's resemblance to a health spa had just taken another knock.

'Oh, you know,' Benny said evasively. 'This and that.'

'Ach!' exclaimed Janny. 'Not running away from lurve, were you?' She pouted comically.

'No!' said Benny indignantly - but then realised that it was as good an excuse as any: the wages Tollip was paying weren't bad, but it wouldn't do any harm to have another reason to back up her posting here. 'Well, maybe a bit. And the money's okay,' she added lamely, watching Janny out of the corner of her eye to see if her story held up well enough.

'Yeah, it helps. Pity they've suddenly brought in a comms blackout, though. No word from the folks back home 'til farther notice. Still,' she added brightly

as they left the counter and went in search of a seat, 'that should suit you!'

'Eh?'

'Running away from lurve, didn't you say?'

'Oh, yeah. Nothing heavy - just... you know... What was that about the comms blackout?' She suddenly remembered Joseph saying something about it.

'They didn't tell you on the way over? Tut tut. Announced it this morning: "security reasons" they said. You lot are the last lot in. Closed the doors and battened down the hatches after you arrived.'

'Can they do that?' Benny was more interested in why they might do it than in whether they had the right. Although, obviously, not knowing when she might be allowed out was a bit of a worry.

'In the small print, apparently,' Janny laughed blithely. 'But who reads that, eh? Bonus payments all round, though, so no one's complaining. Not much, anyway.'

Janny had guided them to an empty space at the end of a table - assuming, she realised, that Benny - um, Anghela - might not want to over-socialise on her first night. They chatted about this, that and nothing very much, as Benny scanned the other diners. She recognised a couple of lost faces, others that had come in on the same shuttle as her. She watched with some amusement as a fat bloke that had been sitting next to her on the flight in attached himself to a group of newbie girls; and watched with more amusement as they seemed to decide, en masse, that they weren't really that hungry anyway, and drifted off.

Benny realised suddenly that Janny was saying something to her.

'Sorry - space lag,' she apologised weakly. 'Not quite with it all yet.'

'No probs Anj - is Anj okay?'

Benny nodded a bit too enthusiastically: she hadn't given any thought to whether her new name would have a diminutive. It made her sound like a secretary. But then 'Benny' made her sound like man. Swings and roundabouts.

'What were you saying?'

'The life science teams have gone into a right huddle recently,' repeated Janny, lowering her voice for no reason that Benny could see: the nearest other diners were a good three tables from them. 'They're having their meals in their section - someone says they've found an alien, but you know what rumours are like.'

Benny nodded knowledgeably. 'Never listen to 'em myself,' she said. 'Only start 'em!'

'And then of course,' Janny leaned closer, 'there's the Greenhouse.' She winked slowly and mysteriously.

'And that would be...?'

'Hush hush,' Janny whispered. 'Top secret.'

'You'd have to kill me if you told me. That sort of thing.'

'You catch on quick, girl!'

Janny finished her meagre dinner with a grin, leaving Benny feeling slightly cheated about this Greenhouse business. You didn't just drop hints like that and then stuff your face with... Benny looked down at what Janny was stuffing her face with. With green mush. She looked down at her own green mush, and suddenly the chances of getting a jacuzzi and a massage later seemed as remote as those of Jason changing his underpants every day. A little ripple of homesickness tugged at her.

'Some of the guys are having a big poker match in recroom three tonight if you fancy sitting in,' Janny was saying.

'Nah, thanks,' said Benny after what she thought was a considered pause. 'Gonna get an early night, I think. If I can sleep in this heat.'

'It's not so much the heat as the humidity. Believe me, after a couple of days, everything you put on feels like it's already been worn half a dozen times. And smells like it.'

'Good job I brought my industrial strength deodorant.'

'You'll need it girl! And don't forget your antifungal. Spray it everywhere - and I mean *everywhere*. This place gives you athlete's foot, crotch, pit and crack, believe me. Right - I better get off. Catch you later maybe? If you change your mind, just ask anyone: recroom three, starts in about half an hour.'

'Cheers Janny! Might see you there.'

And Janny was off, high-fiving at least four people on her way out. *Paaaarty* animal!

Benny turned back to the remains of her meal - only to discover a man sitting right opposite her.

'Hi,' he said.

It was Piotr - the man who'd created Anghela Maru.

'Anghela?' Piotr asked, eyebrows raised.

Benny nodded. The man looked haggard - although, Benny reflected, probably no more haggard than spending a few weeks here in the heat and the damp would make you. And just as pale and unhealthy as he'd looked on the video.

'Piotr Volkov,' he said, his hands still clasped on the table in front of him, making no effort at social niceties. 'You received the... the message, then?'

'Isn't this all a bit cloak and dagger?'

He gave a tired shrug.

'Tollip and his people have ways of deflecting investigations.'

'And what, exactly, is it that needs investigating?'

'I thought that was what you were here for.'

'I'm an archaeologist, not a policewoman.' Benny felt herself bristling; she'd come halfway across the system, committed herself to a month - at least - in a jungle hell, and fully expected to go home with some fungal infection that would blight her lovelife for years to come.

She'd expected a slightly warmer welcome than this. 'I'm here because you said Liso had vanished and because...' She paused and made the spur-of-the-moment decision not to mention Liso's own message. 'And because I care,' she finished the sentence with a shameful lie. She could hardly come straight out and say: 'Well actually, Piotr, I'm here partly because it sounded like a jolly good mystery, but mainly because I wanted to stick two fingers up at Ms Jones and show her that I knew perfectly well how to run my life.'

'You knew her well, then?'

'Um... not well, no, not really. But she was okay - a good person.' Benny paused. It was only now sinking in that she was actually showing more interest in Liso now that she was presumed dead than she ever had when she was alive.

'Look, if I'd known there'd be a shutdown on this place the moment I arrived, and that I'd be stuck here for Goddess-knows how long, I might not have come. Fair enough? But I'm here now - and a bit of appreciation, a bit of "Hi Ben- Anghela, thanks for coming!" wouldn't go amiss, you know.'

Piotr's eyes sunk towards his hands. He looked up slowly.

'I'm sorry. It's just...' He shrugged a big, tired shrug at the room around them. 'It gets you down, you know? And Liso... well, we were close....'

'Girlfriend?'

A smile tugged at the corner of Piotr's mouth.

'Not that close. But we were friends.' (But not close enough for you, eh Piotr? Benny thought.) 'Like you say, she was okay.'

'So you don't think she's still alive?'

He shrugged again. There were too many shrugs in the conversation for Benny's liking. It was like trying to pin Jason down. 'She hasn't been found - make what you want of that. There are no predators here - no animals bigger than insects at all. But with the heat and the damp and the fungi and what-have-you... decay sets in pretty quickly.' Piotr's shoulders had sunk again. Benny realised that he probably hadn't talked about Liso to anyone else. Not a social animal, then, Piotr. Bet he'd get on great with Janny.

'When did Liso go?'

'About two days ago - just before I sent you the message. She still had your name in her address book.'

'Fast delivery,' Benny said. 'Must have cost you an arm and a leg.'

He replied with a predictable shrug. This was clearly a man with a strong sense of his own opinions.

'So you're still an archaeologist, then?' he said, making a strained attempt to move the conversation on.

'You can take the girl out of the catacombs... etc etc,' Benny said

It dragged a grin out of him. 'What d'you want to know, then?' Now we're getting somewhere.

'Anything you can tell me.'

Piotr leaned back in his chair and scratched at his scalp. Benny noticed a thin, crusty mark there, and shuddered inwardly.

'One of Tollip's fly-by camera ships spotted this place about a year ago and he staked his claim. A small recon team arrived six months later and set up a preliminary scouting base. A few more specialists were brought in and then it looked like the place was going to be pronounced "fit for colonisation - some work needed": no indigenes, obviously, or he'd have lost his claim, just about enough mineral resources to keep a small colony going. Bearable climate. I arrived at that point - geologist by trade - and a few days later, something changed.' He frowned. 'Lots of rumours going round - they'd found signs of intelligent life; they'd found alien cities. No one really knew what it was, but suddenly it looked like the "for sale" sign had been taken down. Tollip - well, Bleize, actually: she's his right-hand man - started low-level filtering of comms in and out. And then people stopped talking about things. Used to be that we'd all muck in together, lots of chatting between all the different specialities here. But since then, Bleize has tried her hardest to keep everyone in their own little groups.'

'And why d'you reckon that is?'

Piotr paused and, theatrically, looked around the mess hall, before leaning closer. Benny had a flashback to his video message.

'I think they've found something - something big, something that they want to keep between as few people as possible.'

Piotr stared at her intently, and for the first time she noticed the slight tic at the corner of his eye. Was this what she was going to be like in a month's time? He rubbed absently at the fungal patch hiding in the stubble of his hair. She tried not to stare.

'So what's the speculation?' she asked after a few seconds' consideration. 'I mean, you must have talked about it with people - even if they're people who don't know anything.'

'Aliens,' was Piotr's answer. His eyes fixed on hers. 'They've found aliens.'

Benny couldn't work him out: the fact he'd sent her the 'come help' message suggested that he was close to Liso; his words suggested that he was close to her - maybe a good deal closer to her than she'd been to him, though; and yet his whole tone, his body language, spoke of a man who didn't really care very much about anything. Was that just him, or was it what this planet did to you? Would she end up back on the Collection, confronted by Adrian and Jason telling her that Peter had spoken his first sentence shrugging and saying 'Whatever', before heading for the bath and a bottle of wine?

In fact, as Benny reached her room, she realised how quickly she'd become used to her shirt clinging to her body, and how sweat, pooling in the backs of her knees, was wetting the backs of her trousers again. She almost didn't want to look at herself in the mirror for fear of how much more depressed it might

make her. But, of course, she had to. And it did.

The room smelled of mould and stale, old clothes. And, naturally, the ubiquitous damp flannel stink that she knew would stay with her, infused into every pore, for the rest of her life.

She'd only been here a few hours, and already she felt the place crawling over her skin, worming its fetid way inside her. How did everyone else manage? She stripped off and scrubbed herself in the shower - until she discovered why Janny had showered so quickly: the water cut out after two minutes.

Benny was woken at 7.30 am by the room lights slowly rising to full brightness. She rolled over in her damp bed and felt the cool, sodden pillow against her cheek. Behind her, she could hear Janny scrambling around, showering and getting dressed. When she'd finally worked out where she was and what she was doing there, Benny rolled over and blearily said good morning.

'Gonna rain today,' Janny said brightly, tugging her boots on. 'Heard it from one of the met men last night. Should cool it down a bit. You know where you're going this morning? I 'spect Bleize'll want to break you new recruits in.'

'You make it sound unpleasantly like the army,' Benny drawled, heaving herself up onto her elbow and flapping her damp vest around where it was sticking to her chest.

Janny just grinned.

'The next best thing,' she said.

'Don't worry,' said Benny, waving her away. 'I'll find wherever it is I'm supposed to be. It'll be in the booklet, I imagine.' She jerked her head in the direction of the booklet she'd been issued with on arrival, propped on the shelf.

'Okay, Anj - see you later!'

And with a cheery smile, Janny was gone.

'This better be worth it, Liso,' muttered Benny as she got herself ready. As she clawed her fingers through her bird's nest of a hairdo, she spotted the wall clock, realised that she was going to be late, and rushed from the room, her bootlaces flapping on the grimy plastic floor.

There were eight of them, most of them slouching, a few looking unnaturally bright and alert (with, thought Benny, an emphasis on the 'unnaturally' - in an environment like this, she imagined the use of stimulants, both legal and illegal, was probably fairly common), when Benny arrived, huffing and puffing and sweating. Of course.

Bleize gave a little jolt, as though she hadn't been expecting anyone else, and waited until Benny had grabbed a seat near the back before continuing

with her induction speech. She hadn't missed much, Benny discovered later. Just the usual base rules and regulations, all of which - should she be bothered to read them - were in the back of the booklet.

Finally, Bleize perched herself on the edge of a desk.

'Hugo Tollip has asked me to personally apologise for the fact that we've had to invoke the extension terms and conditions of your contracts. Confidentiality forbids me from actually explaining why, but... well, trust me. Soon I imagine you'll find out and then you'll understand. One or two of you were already here for a full month, so for you things won't be any different. Those of you who signed up for shorter duties will have explanatory messages forwarded to your nearest and dearest. And, of course, you'll be handsomely rewarded.'

Benny wanted to ask how handsomely, but it was her first morning, and she'd already made a bit of an arse of herself by being late: she didn't want to compound it by looking like a mercenary arse.

'Now I don't want this to go to your heads,' said Bleize, a thin smile making a brief appearance, 'but you lot are, shall we say, something of a special case. You're our front-line specialists, so-to-speak; and as such, your briefing will be a little more in-depth than some of the other staff on the base. Some of you will be heading up new teams, and some of you will be replacing existing team leaders whose contracts have just expired. Of course, this also means that you will be subject to stricter security.' She picked up her datapad, tapped something into it, and handed it to a man at the front of the room. 'If you'd all like to thumbprint this - it's a standard confidentiality agreement, much like the one you signed when you accepted your contracts for Tollip's World, but with a few added bits and bobs. Then we can get on.'

Ha! thought Benny. If she thinks I'm signing it without reading it, she's got another think coming. Benny had been caught out this way before - and had nearly lost all rights to her own identity - and wasn't about to be caught out again. But when the pad reached her and she scanned the contract (to the tuts and mutterings of people next in line who seemed in an indecent haste to sign their rights away), it didn't seem totally unreasonable: a bit stricter on the 'don't blab' stuff and clear guidelines on who they were - and more importantly who they weren't - allowed to talk to on the base. What could she do? If she didn't sign it, they'd probably just confine her, without wages, to her room. For a month.

She signed.

'Good,' said Bleize briskly as the pad reached her hands again. 'That's that out of the way. Now I can tell you a bit more about what's happening here.... Tollip's World was originally thought to be uninhabited. Fly-by scans and the initial scout team's report showed that it had a human-sustainable ecosystem, if a little on the vigorous side, but with no signs of indigenous intelligent life.

'However, a week ago, we made a discovery - we found tunnels.'

Tunnels! thought Benny with a quite irrational surge of excitement and then recalled that, at the last count, she'd investigated, ooh, about three hundred sets of tunnels. Was this how low she'd sunk? That the idea of tunnels was setting her pulse racing? And she'd been here less than twenty-four hours... How delirious was she going to be in twenty-four days?

'At the moment, we've only found a few, but indications are that there may be a vast, subterranean network of them.'

Subterranean tunnels, Benny thought critically. *As opposed to...*?

'We don't have a clear idea, yet, of who - or what - made them, but we suspect that they may be connected with a series of energy pulses - static electrical discharges - that we've been picking up.'

Someone - a short, slim man with a distinctly greenish complexion - stuck his hand up. Bleize nodded at him.

'Are the pulses intelligent?' he asked. 'I mean, do they follow a pattern?'

Bleize shook her head.

'Sensor teams are having difficulties pinpointing the source of them: their best guess is that something underground is generating an intermittent energy field.' She raised her hands to forestall further questions on the subject. 'I'm not the person to ask. Our head of scanning will be speaking to some of you later today, the ones with appropriate clearance - I'm sure he'll answer your questions as best he can.'

'As I was saying: it's possible that the static pulses are connected to the tunnels or their makers. So far, we haven't made much headway in exploring them: that's why some of you are here.' Her eyes danced around the people gathered before her, catching Benny's as they went. 'The plantlife here on Tollip's World is incredibly vigorous. We've used standard military exfoliants, tried slash and burn, but the stuff grows back almost overnight; sometimes faster. If no one's already said it to you - and believe me, they will: it's a jungle out there. Literally and figuratively.'

There was no pause for the audience to appreciate her joke, and Benny quickly realised that it hadn't been a joke.

'Whilst we haven't found any animal life larger than insects, we're taking every precaution with exploratory teams: you may already have heard rumours about a missing member of staff, and until we know what's happened to her, we're taking no chances with you. All missions outside the base - I repeat, *all* missions - will be accompanied by armed staff.'

Benny heard a tiny pause before the last word, and knew that Bleize had been on the point of saying 'guards'. Not that it really came as much of a surprise: despite this being a civilian, ostensibly scientific, mission, she was under no illusions that it was being run as if it were a military one. Hugo Tollip was rich enough to have his own private militia - and it was clear that he was intent on protecting his investment.

They were issued with datapads containing annotated maps of the base and

the surrounding areas - which were sketchy, thought Benny, to the point of being useless, perhaps to discourage them from wandering off on their own. Bleize impressed on them all the need to keep this information strictly to themselves, pointing out the time-delete facility programmed into the pads: at the end of every day, their digital memories would be wiped and new data would be uploaded to them the following morning. Considering that there was - at least for the grunts like her - a complete comms blackout on offworld transmissions, it seemed a bit belt-and-braces; but it only went to confirm Benny's growing suspicions that whatever they'd found here was bigger than they were letting on.

There was a break for coffee - which seemed remarkably civilised considering the bargain-basement accommodation and canteen food - whilst Bleize went off somewhere. Benny found herself milling around with half a dozen strangers, most of whom seemed as puzzled as she was. A painfully tall black guy sidled up to her as she was pouring herself a third cup of coffee and gave her an awkward smile.

'Anthony,' he said, proffering his hand. 'Blake. Genomics.'

'You here to build us an alien from leftover bits, then?'

'Not sure my talents stretch that far. What's your field, then?'

'Archaeology,' said Benny. 'Anghela Maru.' She smiled smugly to herself at the fact that she hadn't tripped over her own name

'Nice to meet you.' He glanced around. 'This is all a bit... weird, isn't it? I'm worried about my wife - she's due to have a baby in just over a month.'

'Don't worry - I think we'll all be out of here by then.' Benny thought - guiltily briefly - of Peter. She knew he was in good hands with Jason and Adrian, but still...

'Think?' She caught the slight tremor in his voice. Anthony was looking for reassurance.

'I'm sure. How long you sign on for, then? Originally.'

'Two weeks - thought the money would come in useful, and Sierah's gone to stay with her parents for a couple of weeks. Wasn't sure I could cope with in-laws just now.'

That, thought Benny, is one thing I don't have to worry about at least.

Behind them, Bleize had returned, and coughed to bring them all back to attention. She was holding up a rucksack.

'Right!' she announced. 'Basic safety and equipment - let's get this out of the way now.' She checked her watch. 'In two hours, some of you are going to get your first experience of Tollip's World, in the raw.'

'They don't waste time, do they?' said Anthony - with a vaguely scared look in his eyes.

'Don't worry.' Benny squeezed his arm. 'No predators, remember? What could go wrong?'

His shoulders slumped.

'Don't say that,' he moaned. 'You know what always happens when people say that.'

Chapter 3

If the inside of the base had been warm and sweaty, then the outside was... well, warmer and sweatier. Benny puffed out her breath in a big, heavy sigh, feeling the sweat prickle out in fresh waves from her pores. She checked the bit of sky she could see: no sign of the rain that Janny had promised her.

She pulled a pained face at Piotr, standing to her right. He gave a tiny shrug, used to the heat, Benny imagined. She wasn't quite sure how he'd wangled being out here with her on her first 'walkabout', but it was (only vaguely) reassuring to have a familiar face there.

She wriggled her shoulders, adjusting the gel-padded straps of her rucksack, and joined the others at the foot of the ramp where the jungle began, just a few dozen yards further on: two men in haz-suits were methodically spraying the ground around the end of the ramp with something from big, translucent tanks strapped to their backs. Herbicide, no doubt, trying to keep the jungle at bay.

Bleize seemed undaunted, and drew herself up to her full 5'4". She wheeled around, a general in charge of her troops. All she was missing, mused Benny, was a swagger stick and a peaked cap.

'Right!' she barked. 'You all know the drill. No one goes off alone. Parties of two, minimum, at all times, and every party's to be accompanied by at least one security person.' Her eyes darted to the hulking goons that stood, annoyingly calm, at the back of the group. Brains, Benny guessed, were not why they'd been hired. Muscle, shaven heads and a variety of novelty beards probably were. Oh, and the ability to hurt and shoot and kill. Still, not knowing what they were going to find out there, she felt a vague sense of security from knowing they were there. As long as they didn't go stomping all over whatever monkey bones she found.

'It's a two-hour walk to where we found the first of the tunnels, as you know,' continued Bleize. 'So pace yourselves. The ground's fairly flat but the plants make it a bit treacherous. We've tried burning pathways and using cutting lasers, but within a day they've grown over again, so we stopped bothering. Still,' she gave a hearty, if somewhat unconvincing smile, 'you're all professionals you'll cope!' She turned back to the trees, took a deep breath.

'Onward and outward, people!' she bellowed, and launched herself into the jungle.

Jungle, thought Benny grumpily after just twenty minutes of tramping and stomping and tripping and swearing, didn't even *begin* to cover it.

The density of the plant growth was incredible. The ground was covered with a thick carpet of tiny-leaved plants with dark, almost black, leaves, matted together to create something akin to a lawn, from which sprouted the

next level of flora - wiry bushes with needle-like leaves.

Every so often, as her eyes swept around the green and brown panorama, she'd see the bright flash of a flower or a cluster of fruit or combinations of the two. But, compared to other jungles she'd seen, it was disappointingly monochrome. Dull, even. She sighed. No monkeys, no lush flowers... She gazed up at the ragged hole of cobalt sky above the base. And no bloody sunshine.

Ploughing through the undergrowth was tough going, and Benny was maliciously pleased to hear the constant grunts and groans and curses from the rest of the group as their legs repeatedly snagged on them. The air itself was filtered a sickly green by the canopy of leaves high, high overhead, giving everything an ill, washed-out look. Ahead of them, fading to an even deeper green, trees crowded in around them: there could have been a gingerbread cottage with an icing-sugar roof just a hundred yards from them and they'd never have seen it. Granted, it would have collapsed with the damp and been covered in fungus by now.

She noticed, with a mix of admiration and irritation, that most of the other newbies seemed quite in awe of the jungle, staring around them with wide, bright eyes, like kids at a theme park. It was - sort of - endearing that even soaked in sweat and panting for breath they could still find it all wonderful. When did she lose that, she wondered?

'You'll notice,' came Bleize's voice, like that of a tour guide still new enough to be entranced by her subject, 'that there are no birds, and few insects. It'll soon be common knowledge that we think a virus wiped out the native fauna and left very little behind. Traces of it have been found everywhere - but chemically inactivated, somehow, either by natural or artificial means. We're still working on how the insects survived, and on whether the virus is now truly inactive.'

'Truly inactive?' Benny found herself saying, and caught the horror in the eyes of a couple of the others.

'Don't worry,' said Bleize. 'We're pretty sure it is. But this is an alien world, remember. Take nothing for granted. The virologists haven't been able to resurrect it, no matter how hard they've tried.' Oh, thought Benny, *and how I bet they've tried.* 'D'you think I'd be out here without a haz-suit if there was any doubt?'

Bleize laughed heartily, and Benny almost hoped she was wrong, just to see the look on her face.

'I'm sure you can hear the relief in my voice,' Benny grunted, extricating her boot from yet another clump of plants.

It was tiring work-second only, thought Benny, to tramping across deserts. And the enervating effects of the heat and the damp didn't help. Not for the first time, she realised that, whatever Tollip's World held, it must be a considerable prize to put up with all this.

She took a moment to look around the rest of Bleize's group: six of them (plus three security), all of them newbies apart from Piotr and Bleize herself. She didn't know whether Piotr had pulled strings to get himself on this party, or whether he'd have been there anyway, even without his connection to Benny and Liso. She was already rapidly reaching the point of not caring.

'Tell me more about Liso,' Benny said suddenly to him, checking that the others were out of earshot.

'What d'you want to know?'

Benny sighed theatrically. This was like pulling teeth. More than you told me last night, she wanted to yell at him.

'Just, you know... stuff,' she ended up saying, lamely. 'I mean look: if you'd thought she'd just got lost, you wouldn't have got that friend of yours to conjure up...' She looked around, suddenly aware of what she was saying and lowered her voice even further. 'You know... me. It's a lot of effort to go to for just a friend. No offence.'

They ploughed on in silence for a few moments before Piotr spoke in a low voice.

'Liso spoke about you as being the best.'

'She did?'

'Not always conventional,' Piotr continued, almost as if reciting Liso's own words. 'Not always likeable.'

'Thanks.'

'But good - you know? And someone who didn't stand for crap.'

'Oh.' Benny was a bit taken aback. She hardly knew Liso. They'd attended a couple of lectures in paleobotany and anthroposymbology and something that began with an x that she'd failed; and they'd spent a drunken night in one of the bars. But she couldn't honestly say that she'd known Liso in any great depth. A nice girl, but not someone that she'd have expected to be chasing halfway across the sector to find.

'Well, until I get myself killed falling into a bush,' said Benny, hitching her pack higher on her back, 'I'll take that as a compliment.'

And, Goddess inside, Piotr almost smiled.

Almost.

They trudged in silence for a while, before Bleize dropped back and fell in alongside her.

'How's it going Anghela?'

If Benny's face showed puzzlement at the name, Bleize didn't spot it. She was going to have to be careful: she needed to mix more, she knew, get more people using her new name so that she wouldn't be quite so thrown when someone did use it.

'Oh, you know... hot, tired. Depressed. Wishing I was back home. Or dead.'

Bleize nodded, and Benny wondered whether Bleize had actually registered the sarcasm.

'Where's home, then?' she asked.

Bugger! Where's home?

'Wherever I lay my sonic trowel,' Benny quipped back, quite pleased at her response. 'You know what it's like with archaeologists: just one jolly jaunt after another. After a while, you begin to forget where your real home is.'

'I know,' agreed Bleize. 'Haven't been in the same place longer than six months in the past five years. Keeps you on your toes, eh?'

'Something like that,' agreed Benny, feeling an awkwardness creeping into her voice.

Bleize breezed on: 'Tunnels are an hour away - think you'll be pleased.'

'I hope so - if they're just big rabbit holes, you're going to have one very disappointed archaeologist on your hands.' Benny paused. 'How many other archaeologists d'you have here? Am I going to be working with them?'

'Ah,' said Bleize. 'Problem there. Surprisingly hard to come by, you lot. Good ones at any rate. Lost one already.'

'Liso.' Benny nodded, trying to look suitably vague - and yet concerned at the same time.

'You knew her?'

'Oh just rumours, you know. Talk. She vanished, didn't she?'

Bleize nodded and Benny thought she saw genuine regret in the woman's hardened face.

'How did she vanish? I mean, if I'm going to be treading in her footsteps, so to speak, it makes sense to know what happened to her. After all, to lose one archaeologist might be considered careless,' she quipped, realising halfway through the misquote that Bleize hadn't spotted her devastating humour, and didn't bother with the rest of it.

Bleize considered for a moment.

'She vanished - simple as that. Went out into the jungle on her own. Against regs, stupidly, too. But there it is. Never came back.'

'So she could still be out here somewhere?'

Bleize peered down her nose at Benny.

'Been gone almost four days. Not a hardened camper, from what I hear. Survival skills are everything out in the jungle.' Bleize shook her head sharply. 'Don't think she'll be coming back.'

As tunnels went, thought Benny, she'd seen less impressive ones: the ones on Dagomere had been rabbit-holes compared to these - literally, now she came to think about it, and made by the largest rabbits she'd seen since Adrian brought Peter a huge great stuffed one (no, not a furry toy one - a stuffed one) for his first birthday, a huge great stuffed one that Peter had loved, but that had given her nightmares for a week - and she'd had to spend three days crawling through them on her belly, scared at any moment that they'd collapse on her. So the sight of a proper, woman-size hole into the ground

lifted her spirits a little. They all crowded around the shallow pit that had been excavated at the tunnel mouth.

'All grown over when we found it,' said Bleize, almost proudly. 'One of our people fell through - would have probably missed it otherwise.'

It was roughly the shape a human-made tunnel might be, well under a metre wide and a fair bit less two metres high. A mess of pallid creepers lined the walls, spreading out into the open air like the fingers of some subterranean creature about to pull itself out into the sunlight.

'How far do they go?' asked Benny.

Bleize shrugged.

'So far, we've found a few hundred yards of them, but we wanted to wait until we had an expert on hand.' She dipped her head towards Benny, and addressed everyone. 'If you haven't had the pleasure, this is Anghela Maru, our new archaeologist. Don't touch anything unless she gives you the thumbs up, people. Anything you want to say, Anghela?'

Benny was thrown.

'Um... like Bleize says - please don't touch anything if you can avoid it. You never know what's going to be valuable or informative. If you're in doubt, hands off!' She smiled, hoping to lessen the sound of what she imagined came across as an order, but no one smiled back. They just nodded intensely, although most of them were starting to show signs of tiredness after the trek. Huh! Amateurs!

Bleize nodded sharply. 'Thanks Anghela! Come on people!'

Benny instinctively bristled at the thought of a security guard at her shoulder. She imagined that their primary duty was to Hugo Tollip, rather than to her or to any scientific truth. They were there to protect anything valuable she found, rather than her own valuable person. She comforted herself with the thought that Bleize hadn't thought it odd that she'd want Piotr, a geologist, as her particular companion.

'Check your watches,' said Bleize as they stood at the entrance to the tunnel system. 'Meet back here in one hour.' She looked around, making sure she got a nod from everyone: no excuses later.

Bleize herself took another geologist and one of the security and vanished into the gaping maw, striding as if she were going on nothing more than a bracing country hike. Benny and Piotr were next; behind them, the final two and their guardian were introducing themselves. A great big bear of a man who looked as though he might have had a bit of Turkish in him stepped into line behind Benny and Piotr, and Benny gave him a smile. Great Goddess! - he actually smiled back.

'Anghela,' Benny introduced herself, getting the name right just in time. 'This is Piotr.'

'Ogosto,' said the man and smiled again, a great, welcoming grin full of

teeth and charm. The surprise must have registered on Benny's face, for Ogosto smiled again.

'Not as scary as we look - gotta put a face on for the commandant in there.'

'You know,' said Benny, as they descended into the tunnel, 'you've almost singlehandedly restored my faith in humanity, Ogosto.'

'Pleased to hear it,' the giant replied. 'You want me to go first?'

'No, you keep an eye on us from behind. If you go in front - no offence - but we won't see anything at all!'

Benny felt a little sorry for Ogosto: at well over six feet, the tunnel must have been particularly cramping for him. She looked back, briefly, to see him squeeze his uniformed bulk into the tunnel mouth behind them, cutting out what little daylight filtered down through the jungle canopy. She remembered the helmet lamp she'd been issued with and pulled it from her rucksack and popped it on her head, switching it on. Moments later, another oval of light from Piotr's lamp flitted madly over the tunnel walls at her side. No matter how many times she saw it, she never failed to see the weirdness in knowing where her colleagues were looking. And she never failed to forget how annoying it was for other people when she stared them straight in the face.

So, thought Benny. *To work!*

The tunnels were, she reckoned, drawing on her vast experience of holes in the ground, artificial: the walls were highly compacted soil bound tightly with tree and plant roots, forming a surprisingly strong mesh. She brushed her fingers lightly over them: many were old and shrivelled but new, paler and fleshier ones wove their blind way through. The oddest thing, thought Benny, as they branched to the right - Bleize's party, she knew from the luminous arrow spike embedded in the wall at the junction, had gone left - was that the roots followed the contours of the wall perfectly. There were none of the mad stragglers, poking out into the tunnel space itself, that she'd seen in other abandoned tunnel systems. Either someone had been along recently with a pair of secateurs, or the roots themselves were surprisingly smart. Neither option filled her with much joy.

'Anyone got a match or a lighter on them?' she asked suddenly, halting sharply so that Piotr bumped into her. Neither of them had.

'Air flow,' she explained to Piotr's puzzled face, hovering in the dark. 'The air's being renewed and it'd be interesting to see where it's coming from and where it's going to.' She tried the licky-finger trick, but if there was really any difference, it was too subtle.

As the tunnel curved slowly left, she wished that she'd brought Joseph with her. He might be a bit useless at some things, but he would have been great at mapping the tunnels. And thinking of mapping the tunnels, she pulled out one of the luminous arrow spikes that they'd all been issued with and slapped it into the wall.

The arrow, as well as indicating to the other teams - should they come this way - that someone had been there before them, might also help them find their own way back to the exit.

'So,' said Benny, pausing. She turned to Piotr, and he flinched as the light from her headlamp caught his eyes. 'Any geological insights?'

He gave a shrug. 'Tunnels,' he said dourly. 'In the ground.'

'I hope you're making notes,' Benny said, turning to Ogosto who stood behind her. She had to tip her head back to see his face. He smiled. 'If you're going to learn, learn from the best.'

'So,' countered Piotr sarcastically as Benny turned back to continue their trek. 'Any archaeological insights?'

'Tunnels,' said Benny. 'In the ground. Old ones.'

'Gets better and better,' muttered Piotr, as Benny set off into the darkness.

She still didn't know whether to trust him. Piotr, a man who appeared to have had all life and *joie de vivre* sucked out of him by this wretched planet, struck her as the last man to be playing games. But, as bitter experience had taught her, you could never be sure. Sometimes - okay, usually - the meekest person was the one hiding the dangerous emotional scars or double-motives. She still had the feeling that he wasn't telling her everything he knew about Liso - but that could be just paranoia. Perhaps he, like her, was waiting to build up enough trust.

'How much further are you planning to go?' came the basso profundo voice of Ogosto from above her head. 'Only we're almost half an hour in, and we have to be back in an hour.'

Benny consulted the illuminated screen of her pad, checking the rough map supplied to them. It wasn't much: although she gave the impression of being something of a gung-ho explorer, Bleize was more canny than that, Benny knew. She wouldn't have wanted hordes of inexperienced non-archaeologists traipsing through the tunnels, trampling all over any artefacts in the dark. Only about half a mile, in total, of the tunnel network had been mapped. It was up to them to explore further. Benny wondered whether the members of the other two parties had any archaeological experience, or whether Bleize had simply briefed them to be very careful.

'An hour's not long enough,' Benny grumped, conceding Ogosto's point. 'We're barely a hundred yards further on than the preliminary mappers were.' She reckoned she knew the reason, of course: Bleize was testing them, getting a measure of how good they were, whether they could follow orders - and whether they could follow a map. The next trip out would be longer. She wondered whether they'd be teamed up with the same people. Unobtrusive though Ogosto was, it was hard to talk openly to Piotr with the security man hulking along behind them. Not, she suspected, that further interrogation would actually get her anywhere with him.

She heard a mutter from Ogosto and swung her light up into his face. He was frowning, screwing up his eyes - and not from the light she was shining into them.

'You okay?'

He shook his head slowly, thoughtfully.

'Something...' He paused and looked up at the ceiling of roots, the pale, felt-like mat just inches from his nose. 'Can you feel it?'

Benny opened her mouth to say no - but stopped. She could feel something. A prickling on her skin. She reflexively brushed at her arm, scratching it through the fabric of her sleeve.

'Like static,' she whispered. She glanced at Piotr, who nodded, rubbing at the greying stubble of his hair and wriggling his shoulders.

'Oh shit,' he muttered.

'What?'

'Static pulse,' he whispered. 'It's one of the static pulses.'

They started moving, back down the tunnels the way they'd come - faster than they'd come, obviously, but not nearly fast enough for Benny. Ogosto took the lead - mainly because *the* tunnel wasn't large enough for them to easily swap positions. His muscled bulk bobbed in the light of Benny's lamp. Piotr brought up the rear.

'Tell me again,' Benny said. 'What do these pulses do, exactly? To people.'

Ogosto gave a huge shrug.

'Just the hired muscle, ma'am,' he boomed. 'Sorry.'

'Piotr? What d'you know?'

'No one's been close enough to one to find out,' he said. 'As far as we know.'

Benny's thoughts suddenly jumped to Liso. What if she'd been hit by one of them? Was that why she'd never returned? A chill ran down her spine like iced sweat.

'Any guesses?'

'It's electricity,' he said. 'Bioelectricity, whatever that is - so they say.'

'Is that good bioelectricity as in your hair stands up and we all have a laugh? Or bad bioelectricity as in we all fall down dead?'

'I've heard it's high voltage but low current.'

'So that's hair up, or falling down?'

'Hair up - probably.'

'Could be worse,' Benny quipped grimly. 'You two have got nothing to worry about then. Just don't laugh at me when I look like I have an Afro.'

She could have sworn she heard him frown in the dark.

'Twentieth-century Earth joke,' she said grimly. 'Don't worry about it.'

She saw one of the spike lights glowing dimly in the wall - at least they were heading in the right direction. She suddenly remembered - d'oh! - that they'd

been given radio communicatory things. She pulled hers from the leg pocket of her trousers and thumbed a button.

'Ben- Anghela here.' Damn! 'You lot feeling it? Static or something. Piotr thinks it's one of the energy pulses. We're heading back to the entrance. Over.'

There was a pause. They kept going, walking briskly, like people evacuating a burning building who'd been told not to run - but who could hear the flames crackling menacingly over their shoulders.

'Got you,' came a male voice - could have been anyone. 'We felt it too and we're heading back as well. See you there. Over and out.'

The channel clicked dead and Benny winced.

'Why do people do that?' she muttered.

'What?' asked Piotr breathlessly from just behind her.

'That "over and out" business - over means "over to you", and "out" means, well, out. End of conversation. Why say "Over to you - end of chat"?'

Piotr said nothing.

'I'm babbling, aren't I?' said Benny.

Piotr said even more nothing.

The sensation of static electricity in the tunnel was building up, like the suffocating blanket of a storm in high summer. Benny felt the pressure growing in her ears, the tingling, insect-like scratching of her skin spreading across her back and down her arms. She wanted to tell Ogosto to get a move on - she reckoned it would take them another ten minutes to reach the entrance. But the poor man was finding it hard enough going as it was, his massive shoulders and arms scraping and bumping the matted walls as he tried to go as fast as he could. But there was something basic, something primeval about running through darkened tunnels, even with head-mounted spotlamps. A fear of the unknown, perhaps; a fear of stumbling over something, of running into something you'd missed. Of course, they might be no safer outside. But there was just something comforting about the thought of being in the open: humans weren't psychologically designed to be comfortable in tunnels.

Maybe nothing would happen; maybe it would pass under their feet and they'd get nothing more than a mild static shock. But Benny had learned that where there were unexplained phenomena - particularly electrical unexplained phenomena - there usually followed trouble. And normally painful trouble. Images of Liso rose unbidden in her mind as she caught her foot on a bump on the ground (curious how the roots that lined the walls had managed to ignore the floor completely) and she stumbled into Ogosto's broad back. She could picture Liso, down here in the tunnels when one of the static shocks hit. Maybe she'd sensed it coming, had started to run for the exit. Maybe she'd just been caught unawares, fried where she stood.

'Okay?' grunted Ogosto as Benny realised she'd planted her palm firmly on

one - rather nicely moulded - buttock as she'd stumbled.

'Um... yeah,' she said, glad that he couldn't see her face.

'Nearly there,' he said - although Benny knew that they weren't nearly enough nearly there. She wondered if the other teams had made it, whether they were waiting for them outside.

Damn you! thought Benny. Whoever you *were* that made these tunnels... *why* couldn't you have left something *interesting* for us to find? At least if they'd stumbled across a bowl or something, they might have been delayed, and not gone as far into the tunnel network. And had a shorter trip back.

'Can you smell that?' whispered Piotr at her back, fear barely disguised in his voice.

'That's probably me,' said Benny gruffly.

'No... smells like... like wet horses.'

'Like I said,' replied Benny. 'Probably me. Just keep moving.'

But then she smelled it too, and it really *did* smell like wet horses.

'Probably just the - ooj! - static.' She caught her foot again, but this time managed to avoid steadying herself on Ogosto's arse. Unfortunately, Ogosto chose that moment to stop dead and she ran smack bang into his back, rebounding against Piotr who nearly went rolling into the darkness licking at their heels.

'What?' hissed Benny.

'My head...' His voice descended to a low moan and Benny saw him bring his hands up to his head.

'What's wrong Ogosto? Come on - we've got to keep going.'

But he started to rock forwards, reaching out to support himself on the walls at either side of him, his powerful arms bent, the muscles pumped up like huge hams.

And then it hit.

The roots, matted together into an impenetrable blanket lining the walls, had become luminous. A wave of pale blue-green light raced past them. A soft, cool strobe that pushed out creepy shadows, it seemed to be made up of thousands of tiny crackles of cold light, leaping and dancing between the roots around them. Benny heard a sound in her head like a vast wind, and felt the hair on her head fluff up in a moment. Instinctively, she pulled her hands in, trying not to brush the roots. The wave rolled past her and she saw, too late, that Ogosto's hands were pressed into the walls, his dark fingers sunk in the pale, sparkling mat. Before she could warn him, the pale, verdant glow spread out across his hands, like a luminous glove, and then down his forearms to the elbows. In a moment, the security guard's arms were sheathed in lambent fire, following every contour of clothing and muscle; and on across his back and up his neck, over his head. The man seemed paralysed, motionless as the static coated his body.

And then it was gone. And all Benny could see was Ogosto's massive

silhouette as the wave rolled on down the tunnel ahead of them, a circular band of light that faded suddenly as it turned a corner, leaving Benny shaking and tingling and feeling like she wanted to throw up.

Silently, like a felled tree, Ogosto toppled face down and lay deathly still.

Chapter 4

'Man down!' shouted Benny into her radio, feeling like some marine in a film.

Ogosto lay in front of her, face down: his fingers had snagged in the roots on the walls, dragging huge skeins of them with him, like sloughed skin. Gingerly, she crouched beside him and checked his neck, worried that there might be some residual charge in him. But there was nothing - just the warm softness of his skin - and a welcoming pulse.

Behind her, Piotr was swearing to himself, the same Polish word over and over again, like a mantra, until it started sounding like gibberish to her and she snapped at him to shut up.

'What's happened?' came Bleize's voice over the radio. She was fading in and out, a harsh crackle laid over her voice.

Benny scrabbled at the buttons on the device still grasped in her sweating hand.

'It's Ogosto - the static pulse caught him. He's down - seems okay, but he's out.'

She remembered that the static still seemed to be travelling through the tunnel. 'Get yourself out into the open,' she barked to Bleize. 'Wait until the pulse has passed or it'll catch you too,' she said. 'Ogosto's not going anywhere for a while.'

'We're outside now,' came back Bleize's voice. 'We'll be in as soon as it's safe.'

'We'll wait,' replied Benny and clicked the radio off.

'Now,' she said firmly to Piotr who was clenching and unclenching his fists, staring into the darkness as though he were about to have a seizure. 'Snap out of it or I'll slap you. I need you to look after him.'

She lowered her head so that his pale, shocked face was illuminated by her lamp. He winced, his pupils shrinking to dots under the sudden onslaught.

'Stay with him,' she said slowly and calmly. 'I've rolled him into the recovery position - just make sure he doesn't turn over, throw up and choke on his own sick. Got that?'

He shook his head like a dim animal, not understanding.

'But why... where are you going?'

'I'll be back in a few minutes, trust me.'

He grabbed at her, the force of his grip surprising her. She could smell his breath, oddly cloying in the cool dampness of the tunnel. As the light skittered over his unshaven face, she fought down a sudden irrational impulse to push him away, and felt ashamed of herself. He was just scared. And she was leaving him here, in a dark tunnel, with an unconscious man.

'Look, I'm sorry I've got to go - but I'll be back before they find you. Trust me.' She squeezed the hand that gripped her wrist as gently as she could, and

disengaged his fingers.

'Where are you going?' he repeated, reaching out for her again. She dodged his hands as she clambered to her feet.

'I'm an archaeologist - and I want to find out what happened to Liso. And I can't do that with Major General Bleize or her goons sticking to me like snot.' She paused and peered down at the pathetic, shivering man crouching in front of her. 'You do want me to find Liso, don't you?' Oh, *how low...* But this was as good a chance as she'd had so far to go poking around on her own. She reckoned she had over half an hour, allowing for them to decide it was safe, and for them to find her. Long enough to at least check out a bit more of the tunnel network without an escort.

'Please,' said Piotr pathetically. 'Don't leave me. What if it comes again?'

'It won't,' said Benny firmly with a conviction she didn't feel. 'And it didn't harm us, did it - just don't touch the walls. Okay? You'll be fine - look at it this way - who's more likely to get into trouble? You or me?'

Piotr's eyes showed that he didn't believe her, but she'd made her decision. She pulled his own radio from his belt and pressed it into his hands, showing him the button.

'If you need me, press...' She checked her own radio for its station number, clipping it onto her belt so that Piotr could see she had it. 'Press four. That's me. And I'll come back.'

He stared at his radio as if she'd given him a turd. Please Piotr, she willed. Don't break on me *now*.

'Liso would want this, wouldn't she?' Benny said.

She didn't wait for a nod. She squeezed his shoulder and slipped past him into the darkness, leaving him with an unconscious security guard and his own, trembling fears.

She kept trying not to think of herself as a callous, heartless woman leaving a terrified man in the dark, but it was really, really hard. She glanced back every couple of paces until the flitting firefly of Piotr's headlamp was swallowed up by the tunnel. It winked once, brightly, and she pictured Piotr kneeling there in the dark, watching her go, leaving him alone. You're going to have a lot of making up to do to him, she thought.

Once out of the reach of that accusing light, Benny paused and reached out to touch the roots that bound the walls together, half expecting some residual charge to leap out and bite her, but she felt nothing. Just coarse, fibrous roots. Pulling out a small trowel and pick from her backpack, she tore back the roots to see if there were any air vents or ducts behind them but found nothing more than compacted soil, bound together with more roots. Could it be the roots themselves making fresh air. Or maybe channelling it down from above? Why would plants do that? Maybe whoever had made the tunnels had hand-picked these particular plants because of some natural ability.

Time for puzzling over that later. She didn't have long, and she was determined to find something - anything - to justify her callous abandonment of Piotr.

She found the last of the luminous arrow spikes that they'd left, and remembered that they'd only been twenty or thirty yards further on when they'd sensed the static.

Benny thanked the Goddess that she'd never suffered from claustrophobia. The darkness and the pallid, wormlike matting of the walls pressed in on her, despite the relative freshness of the air. She travelled as fast as she could, a tiny bubble of light flowing along a dark vein in the ground, and slapped another arrowspike in the wall. She wondered what the constructors of the tunnels must have been like: presumably about human size - perhaps a little wider, but certainly not taller. Tunnel-building was, she knew, no indicator of intelligence, although she was hard-pressed to think of a species as large, presumably, as the ones that had built these that hadn't been intelligent, even if it had just been a simple social intelligence. But real intelligence usually left behind artefacts, things. Bits and bobs. Used underwear, comics and drinks cans. And so far, so nothing. As she reached a fork in the tunnel she chose right, and poked another arrow into the wall, and wondered whether Bleize's people hadn't already found - and cleared out - any artefacts. But that didn't make sense: surely they'd have shown them to her. What's the point of hiring an archaeologist and then hiding the goodies?

Whoa! She brought herself up short as some subtle change in the acoustics alerted her. The tunnel widened suddenly, and, irritated by the headlamp and the fact that she had to keep swinging her head from side to side to see anything, she grubbed around in her rucksack and brought out a torch.

Come to mamma! she thought with glee as she realised that the tunnel had become a chamber. A room. An empty room, granted. But a room. A foot or two higher than the passageway, with a domed roof. Circular and about twenty feet across, four - no, five - passages led off from it. The air felt slightly stilled, slightly more stale, and a chill tickled her spine. Not the static again. This was something different. Cautiously, she approached one of the openings and peered in.

At first, she thought she'd made a mistake, and that the doorway was nothing more than an alcove. A mesh of roots netted the opening, perhaps six inches in. She was on the point of moving on to the next opening when she realised that the web of pale roots was much less dense than those lining the walls. Glimmers of darkness showed through as she moved, and there was a sense of perspective, of depth. Cautiously, she reached for the roots and pulled them aside, wincing as they cut into her hands.

But she was right, and the realisation that there was a room, curtained off by the roots, drove her on. She tucked the torch into her waistband and began pulling with both hands. It occurred to her that there were probably more

efficient cutting devices in her rucksack, but she was getting into it, the thrill of physically pulling the fibres back driving her on. Handful after handful she ripped aside, pulling them back into the central chamber where they made a frothy, knotted pile around her ankles.

She'd expected that they'd simply formed a loose door or curtain, and that, at any moment, she'd be through into the chamber beyond. But very quickly she realised that the roots just seemed to go on and on. Much less dense than those lining the walls, granted; but it seemed as though the entire chamber was filled with...

Benny stopped as the swaying beam of her headlamp picked something out. Something that wasn't roots. It had the same pallid, unhealthy sheen to it, but it was larger, more solid. Rounded and at shoulder height.

Benny had enough experience to recognise it instantly. Nestled in amongst the roots and fibres was a skull, bleached and anaemic, its huge, empty eye sockets staring straight at her. It perched on top of what looked like a ribcage, sitting on a sort of pelvis, surmounting two short, stumpy legs. Shivering, Benny retrieved her torch and poked it into the thicket of roots and waved it around and let out a gasp. It wasn't alone.

She counted slowly. Eighteen. Eighteen skeletons, wrapped in roots as if to protect them, fragile items cradled in bubblewrap. Their eyes peered back at her, mute and dark and accusing. And most definitely not human. Or even humanoid. They looked like... well, like hamsters. Like Pakhars. But larger - probably up to her shoulder. And the construction of the ribcage was different to Pakhars: these were made up of a series of overlapping bony plates.

'So what are we going to call you, then?' she whispered to herself. 'Hamsteus summerfieldiensis. Hmm... has a nice ring to it.'

No, she thought after a moment's consideration. *It doesn't at all.*

She tried to think whether the skeletons had looked familiar enough to be related to any other species she'd come across, but she was no zoologist. The Pakhars, as she'd noted before, were the closest thing she could remember seeing.

Behind her, she heard a sharp intake of breath, and spun around.

Staring down at her, with eyes as dark and cold as those of the skeletons, was Ogosto.

After Ogosto had gone, Benny couldn't understand why her first reaction on seeing him hadn't been of relief: after all, the last time she'd seen him he'd been knocked unconscious by alien static electricity. But after he'd gone, the more she thought about it, the more she realised that there was something else, something other than his rapid recovery, that had struck her about him. It had been his posture - an odd, slump-shouldered slouch, quite at odds with the tall, imposing bearing he'd had before.

And his eyes - the way they glowered at her, almost murderously, looking

her up and down as if he'd never seen her before. And focusing, most awkwardly, on her breasts, like they were the most fascinating breasts in the world. Normally that wouldn't have been (much of) a problem. Her breasts hadn't had a great deal of attention for a while; and whilst the feminist in her might have screamed 'Stop violating me with your eyes!', the not-really-feeling-very-attractive-nowadays woman in her would have been on the point of fluttering her eyelids like someone in a Regency holodrama and waving a fan in front of her face whilst saying 'Oh, Mr Darcy, whatever can you mean?'

But Ogosto's attention elicited neither of those reactions from her: it felt more like she was being watched by a chimp or an ape that was simply curious about her ladybumps.

'Ogosto?' she said, wondering why she suddenly felt so nervous, so awkward.

He lifted his head sharply and curled back his upper lip in a way that reminded her of a dog about to snarl. But instead, he sucked in a loud breath through his teeth.

And then he made the noises: clucking, growling noises. Not the cluck or growl of a chicken or a dog, but a modulated clucking and growling, broken up into... well, chunks. Words. Benny was in no doubt that Ogosto was speaking to her. Or trying to.

She leaned forwards, concerned that there was something wrong with him, that the static pulse had damaged his throat or - more worryingly - his brain. But he drew his shoulders back and barked another sentence at her before frowning.

'I can't...' began Benny. 'I don't understand what you're saying.'

She held out her hand to him, a gesture that she hoped would reassure him.

But clearly it didn't: he said something else, inclined his head to one side, and took a couple of steps backwards before turning and disappearing into a tunnel entrance at the far side of the chamber, away from the entrance. What should she do? Follow him?

Before she really had chance to think about what she was doing - and about Piotr and Bleize and the rest of them - Benny made her decision. Hitching her rucksack onto her back, she hefted her torch in her hand, adjusted her headlamp, and set off after him.

How difficult could following someone down a dark, alien tunnel with only a headlamp and a torch be, wondered Benny a few minutes later as she came to a breathless halt in the sweaty dark. The answer, she realised, was in the question.

The passageway that led out of the chamber had continued in a straight line for ten or fifteen yards before forking in two. That, Benny imagined, had been where she'd made her first mistake. Of course, it could have been at the second junction, where, again, the passage had forked in two. Or, quite

possibly, at the third, where it had split into three.

By that time it was all quite moot. Because not only had Benny thoroughly lost Ogosto, but she'd rather more than thoroughly lost herself.

Kicking herself for not using any of the arrowspikes with which her pockets were crammed, she retraced her steps. Well, that was the theory. In practice - of course - she just got herself more lost, as at each intersection she found she became progressively more and more confused as to which way she'd originally come. After ten minutes, she decided to blame the darkness and the damp and the heat for the fact that she just wanted to curl up in a panicky little ball and cry until someone came to rescue her. She pulled out her pad and called up the map of the areas that had already been plotted - but it didn't help. She was somewhere off the top of it, just past where there ought to have been a glowing legend saying: 'Here be lostness - along with loneliness, dehydration and certain death.'

And of course, the radio she'd been given had gone: why she'd clipped it to her belt in that oh-so-clever way, she didn't know. Probably because it had been oh-so-cleverly designed with a belt clip, that was why. There was a designer somewhere who, one day, would be getting a piece of her mind.

She tried shouting, feeling vaguely ashamed that the most eminent archaeologist in the sector should be reduced to standing in the dark bellowing 'Help!' at the top of her lungs. The tunnels swallowed up her cries without so much as a burp, and she just knew that no one would be close enough to hear her.

Logic, she thought determinedly, after a swig of lukewarm water had helped to calm her panic. Logic will get me out of this. A large, cool glass of logic, with perhaps a dash of intuition - and maybe a little paper umbrella with the word 'Exit' printed on it. The last one she imagined she'd have to do without, but it surely couldn't be that hard to summon up the first two.

Of course, logic - as a concept - is great: it cuts through the rubbish, sorts the wheat from the chaff, the suitable from the unsuitable metaphors. But when you have bugger all to apply it to, it's just another word. Benny had no facts, no information to which she could apply any logic. She was lost, in the dark, in tunnels that all looked the same, without a map.

Intuition it was, then!

She picked a direction at random and started walking.

There was precious little to be said about the next hour that didn't involve the words walk, along, tunnels, in, the and dark. Oh, and the occasional fear and depression. But mainly just the walking in dark tunnels bit.

Benny wondered whether she'd ever see daylight again, or whether - like the hammies (she'd decided to call the skeletons she'd found in the chamber that because that was what they most reminded her of; she could have called them Pakhars, but the Pakhars were notably smaller than the hammies, and she didn't really like the idea of linking a race of dead aliens with her little

furry friends) - her skeleton would be found, swathed in plant roots, years from now. Was this what had happened to Liso? Would she stumble over her corpse at any moment? Was Liso even now still wandering the tunnels?

It was then, as Benny was wondering whether Joseph could have calculated the odds of two archaeologists going missing on the same planet in the same week, that she saw a soft patch of light up ahead of her. In seconds she was stumbling out into the almost-painful brilliance of the jungle, struggling and fighting her way through the mad tangle of plants and vines that grew around the tunnel exit.

Her breath was ragged in her throat and she could have cried, just to see the sunlight again, feel the warm, soggy air against her skin. She had no idea where she was, but she was out in the open, and that was a start.

After scrambling to the top of the slope, she stamped down a little patch of ground, sat on her rucksack, and took a few more swigs of water. The sun was invisible behind the almost-fluorescent green of the jungle canopy - so she couldn't use that to navigate by (even if she'd had an idea of where the base was in relation to it). She wondered if Hugo Tollip had bothered to install any positioning signal satellites, but her pad didn't help her with that one, so she assumed he hadn't. She sat in silence for a while, listening to the gentle hissing of *the* green world around her, realising quite how eerie it was not to hear animals or birds. She thought fondly of the imaginary and non-existent monkeys with imaginary and non-existent button eyes that she'd now never meet. She felt sad that they'd probably have been very cute and very friendly. She wondered whether the hammies had been cute and friendly, or whether they'd been a race of warlike vicious carnivores that would have ripped her to shreds as soon as look at her. Whilst smiling at her with their button eyes.

Benny looked up at the trees. I'm *going* delirious, she thought. I've been wandering in the dark for days and I left my mind back at one of the junctions. She thought briefly of Piotr, and hoped that by now Bleize and the others had found him. It had been, she could reflect sombrely, now that she was lost and alone, a particularly callous thing to do. She consoled herself with the thought that he hadn't tried to call her on *the* radio. Or maybe he'd tried after she'd lost hers, and had got nothing but the sound of empty tunnels. That must have reassured him.

And then, away in the distance, barely visible through the densely packed trees, she saw a glint of light from something that couldn't possibly have been a natural part of the jungle. She stood up sharply and craned her head from side to side, noting how *the* light slipped around as if reflecting off a polished surface. She grabbed her rucksack and, almost forgetting how tired she was, set off at a run.

The sound of her own footsteps, crashing and crunching through the undergrowth, was painfully loud. But Benny didn't care: she'd seen signs of something artificial, and that something could only be the base. She didn't

realise that she'd come out so close to it. As she made her way through the trees, she realised that what she'd seen was light glinting from a clear glass or plastic roof, slightly inclined. Even before she saw the whole building, she'd worked out what it was - set in a slight hollow in the jungle was a whopping great greenhouse.

Chapter 5

The Greenhouse.

She remembered what Janny had said back at the base - or, rather, what she hadn't said. She'd hinted with her eyebrow at there being something secret about this Greenhouse thing. Was this it? Something as mundane as an actual greenhouse? And why build a greenhouse in the middle of a tropical jungle? It was like building a fridge in the middle of the Antarctic. Oh, she remembered: they did have fridges in the middle of the Antarctic, didn't they - to keep ice cores and whatnot from melting. Bad comparison.

Benny edged closer to get a better view. The Greenhouse was probably over a hundred yards long (it was hard to tell since the trees grew disconcertingly close to it, obscuring the far end) and about fifty wide. The roof looked to be entirely composed of hexagonal sections of a clear material - probably plastic, since she reckoned it was pretty unlikely they had managed to ship glass all the way out here. The walls were clear for the top three or four yards, and then became opaque and the same white as the base for the remaining ten or fifteen down to the ground. There was a single entrance set in the front end of the building, and there was no one in sight.

If they needed a greenhouse, why build it like this all the way out in the jungle, Benny mused as she wandered closer. What could they want to do out here that they couldn't have done more easily back where all the staff were?

Consumed with curiosity, she soon found herself just a few dozen yards from the entrance. Parked outside it were three small hoversleds, nestling in the undergrowth like huge birds. So there were people inside. Hmm. The door was unguarded - and, indeed, looked unlocked. Just the standard touchplate at the side. Perhaps, despite Janny's hints, the Greenhouse wasn't anything particularly secretive or sinister - just a great big, erm, greenhouse in the middle of the jungle. She listened at the door but there was no sound. She was very tempted to have a look inside, just to satisfy her curiosity that Tollip (she found it hard to think of the faceless businessman that owned this planet as 'Hugo') wasn't conducting macabre and secret experiments on bushes or carrots or something.

It seemed unlikely that Ogosto had gone in here - although if he were disoriented and perhaps injured, and had come this way, where better for him to seek help?

She touched the wall by the door and it slid open with a gentle hum. Benny felt the pull of air being sucked into the small antechamber she was faced with. With a glance back at the verdant jungle behind her, she stepped in and closed the door.

There was a soft hiss and the hallway was flooded with ultraviolet light for a few moments before the door in front of her slid open, giving access to

a long, long corridor which seemed to run the length of the building. Around her, she heard the chug and hum of air conditioning, and realised how cool it was compared to the outside. Obviously they gave more consideration to the working temperature and humidity here than they did back at the base, she thought sulkily.

She took a few hesitant steps forwards, and realised that the corridor was lined with a series of doors, spaced equidistantly down its length. Each one had a small, round porthole set into it. She stole a glance into the first one: it looked like an ordinary office. A portly man in a green hospital outfit was typing at a computer. He didn't notice her, so she moved on to the next one. This, too, was an office - but it seemed deserted, although she couldn't see into all the corners.

In for a penny, Benny thought, realising that there was no point coming this far and not having a good rummage around. She tapped the doorplate and stepped inside.

She'd almost forgotten what it was like to be cool, and the temptation just to sit down, kick off her boots and have a nap in a chair tugged at her. Instead, she had a quick wander around: desks, filing cabinets, computer terminals. Idly, she tapped at a keyboard or two, just to see what it brought up. But all three of the terminals she tried were password locked. Bum.

She slipped back out into the corridor, checking that no one was around. For a top-secret facility, she was surprised at how lax the security was - although Tollip probably thought that being in a dense jungle on a planet in the middle of nowhere was security enough.

There were another couple of offices, both unoccupied, before she came to something that looked much more interesting. In the centre of what looked like a laboratory - all fancy equipment and computer terminals - she saw a large, glass tank. Thick tubes snaked away from it and it was illuminated by a fluorescent strip set into the ceiling. Inside it was... Benny frowned, not quite sure what the shapeless, fat, green thing was. She bobbed from side to side, trying to get as good a view of the lab as she could, before throwing caution to the wind and going in.

Immediately, she could see that the room was larger than it looked from outside - there were another two glass tanks of similar design positioned further down the room. These two were empty, though, so she cautiously stepped up to the first one.

The green thing - actually, quite cuddly-looking - was about *the* size of a rolled-up duvet, although it more resembled a huge, bloated slug. Its surface resembled fine fur, patterned in pale green and white, with a few spotty speckles of blue. Benny walked around the tank, trying to work out-

Oh Goddess!

She nearly threw up on the spot.

As she rounded the tank, she could see a couple of features she hadn't been

able to see before, and the sudden realisation that what looked like two pigs' trotters and the tip of a snout - admittedly all bluey-black - were exactly what they looked like turned her stomach. It was a pig - a mouldy pig. A dead, mouldy pig lying on its side, all covered in an exaggerated version of the fur that you normally find on old bread. Despite all the things she'd seen and eaten in her travels, mould was one of *the* few things that instinctively made her gag: she couldn't touch a slice of bread if she saw even the tiniest tell-tale blue-green patches on it. And here was a whole pig, covered in the stuff.

And then *the* pig twitched, and opened an eye - a pale, creamy eye, sightless.

She clasped her hand instinctively over her mouth and turned away, noticing, as she did so, an electronic clipboard fastened to the side of the tank's stand. Trying not to catch sight of the eye, she scanned it, and wasn't sure whether the pig or *the* contents of the file on *the* clipboard sickened her more. The scientists - butchers, more like - had been experimenting with some spore-bearing plants they'd found in the jungle. Piecing together the technobabble on the clipboard, Benny worked out quickly that they'd also find a way to accelerate the growth of what, normally, would be fairly harmless spores so that, once inhaled, they would consume something the size of the pig in just a few hours. From the inside out. Alive.

She threw down the clipboard in disgust, trying not to look at the sad, twitching thing in the tank. Weapons. That's all this grubby little place was for. Weapons. For a moment, she considered smashing the tank and all the equipment: the thought that the spores might one day be put to work on humans angered and sickened her. But, her reasoning shouted at her, smashing the tank might not be a very good idea.

Realising that she was grinding her teeth and that her hands had balled themselves up into fists, she did a quick check of the other tanks to make sure she hadn't missed some other, similar atrocity. In the closest one, there were just a few disturbing smears of sap-green and blood-red in the bottom. The next one, however, held a small monkey, huddled around a blanket in the corner. She steeled herself for something horrible and put her face close to the glass. It looked like any normal monkey - small, brown and with half-opened button eyes. Not quite the kind of monkey Benny had been expected.

She pressed her fingers against the tank, realising what a miserable existence the poor creature must have in its glass prison. It stared back at her with dull, vacant eyes, not moving, not changing its expression. What part did this poor little sod play in Tollip's grand plan? Had it been infected with something already and, like the pig, was just waiting to die? Part of her wanted to let the thing out - release it into the wild. But the other part - the sensible part that remembered that this was clearly a bio-weapons testing facility, the sensible and sickened part that remembered the pig in the other tank - stopped her.

She gave the little creature a smile and turned away.

Checking there was no one around - how many staff did they have here? And what were they doing? - she went back out into the corridor, and quickly discovered the answer to at least one of those questions as she moved on to the next room.

Again, it seemed oddly deserted. Much the same size as the previous room, it held half a dozen similar glass tanks. But even from the door, she could see - thank the Goddess! - that there were no pigs or other animals in them. She opened the door and stepped in, expecting at any moment to be stopped. But there was no one there - just the hum of equipment and air conditioning.

These tanks were filled with large, glass test tubes, most of which had little plants growing in them. Some of them looked reasonably healthy, but most of them were either pallid and etiolated, or stumpy and leafless. Some of the tubes just had a sliver of greenish material embedded in a whitish gel. At least this room lived up to the place's name, Benny thought.

The next room along, however, was much bigger, and she could see three people in green tunics and trousers fussing around a whole mass of electronic equipment on trolleys that partly shielded whatever was going on in the centre of the room. What Benny could see was that it looked like they had their own little garden in there: she could see hints of green and lots of brown in a big rectangle in the middle. And as one of the people moved to the side - a stocky woman with a mass of blonde curls tied back from her face - she saw what they were doing: a root as thick as Benny's thigh, and just as pale and gnarled, she thought glumly, snaked its way out of the shallow pit in the ground that had been dug, and had been arranged so that it lay on the trolleys, describing an almost complete circle around the room before tapering off. Wires and metal bands and collars were fastened to it at various points along its length, and Benny watched as the blonde woman stuck a long metal probe into it and began connecting the probe up to some of the other equipment.

Another of the people in there - a short, Mediterranean-looking man with tiny eyes and a greasy, bald scalp - was remonstrating with the woman, although Benny couldn't hear what he was saying. He dashed over to her, snatched the cables from her hands, and proceeded to connect them up in a different way. Benny couldn't see the woman's face, but from her sudden hands-on-hips posture, she could imagine that she wasn't smiling kindly at him.

This had to be connected with Ogosto, Benny suddenly realised. That's why the place seemed deserted: they were all working on the roots and the static pulses - although looking at the amount of work involved in digging this particular specimen of root out, that was something they'd had done a while. So if this was a weapons research facility, what was the significance of this particular experiment? To find a way to use the static pulses to kill people? She needed more information, but she could hardly go wading in there and asking

them what they were up to, could she? Industrial espionage wasn't as easy as they made it look.

A deep voice from behind her made her jump.

'Can I help you?'

Benny spun around: a small Indo-Asian man with big, red-framed glasses was staring at her threateningly, his hands on his hips.

'Oh,' she said, thinking quickly. 'Bleize sent me.'

'Why?' The man shifted his weight onto one hip and folded his arms as though he'd seen straight through her and was now going to let her hang herself with her own badly thought-out explanation.

'We lost one of the security guards,' Benny said. 'He got hit by one of the static pulses in the tunnels and when he came round he ran off.' She shot a glance back into the root-room.

A lie is more easily swallowed when *spiced* with the truth, she thought, trying to read the expression on the man's face. She read his name from his badge: Doctor Sikram. His eyes lit up at the mention of the static pulse.

'Really? We were recording,' he said, sounding almost excited. 'We've got loads of data.'

'That's good. What sort of data?'

'Oh Fourier analyses, all sorts of multispectral stuff. It's fascinating! What happened to this guard?'

'He, um, ran off.'

'Before he ran off, though - it could be vitally important.'

'I wasn't actually there when he came round,' Benny apologised.

Sikram pulled a face. 'That's a shame. And you're the only one they've sent after him, are you?'

Benny rolled her eyes in what she hoped was an 'us-against-the-bureaucracy' sort of pally gesture.

'Oh you know what they're like. Couldn't organise a piss-up in a brewery! Bleize is still out looking for him - she thought it was better if I came straight here to check whether you'd seen him. He was acting strangely - she didn't know whether he might be listening in; didn't want to alert him if he was.'

Sikram raised an eyebrow, but she could see she was winning him around.

'And considering what we're doing here -' Nice use of W, she congratulated herself - she thought she'd rather have someone she trusted checking the place out.'

Sikram eyed her own badge.

'And who exactly are you, Ms Maru?'

Benny glanced down at her chest, forgetting, for a second, that she wasn't Benny Summerfield but Anghela Maru. She remembered, too, that her badge didn't give her speciality - just a green strip along the top to indicate her status in the sciences.

'General troubleshooter,' Benny bluffed. 'Scientific taskforce. That sort of

thing.' She leaned in close and tried to give the impression of taking him into her confidence, 'I'm sure you know what it's like, working in this place.' She threw another glance at the room with the wired-up root in it. 'And it looks like you've already got it covered anyway. Did you get anything?'

Sikram nodded cautiously, and she saw his posture relax and his arms unfolded.

'We picked up the pulse, yes - we'll send a full analysis through when we've completed it.'

'A shame we don't see more of you guys,' Benny continued, trying not to seem too desperate for information. 'Some of the people back there are so strung up - no conversation, you know what I mean?'

Sikram gave her a polite smile. Probably a bad move to talk social skills with a scientist in a secret research base in the middle of an alien jungle. Change the subject.

'No chance of a sneak peek, then? A bit of advance info? I mean, if we're going to get it all anyway...'

'It'll all be in the reports,' Sikram said, tightening up again. 'As usual.'

'Good, good,' Benny murmured. She leaned forwards. 'Not sure whether I should tell you this or not...'

'If you're not sure,' Sikram said, 'then you shouldn't.'

She pressed on regardless: surely no one could resist a juicy secret, not even an uptight, officious little man like this; '...but we've found skeletons. I say "we". I found skeletons.'

'Skeletons?' *Ahh! Hooked!*

'In a chamber off one of the tunnels - you do know about the tunnels, don't you?'

'Of course!'

'That's okay then.' Benny smiled as warmly as she could manage. 'Yes - skeletons. Great big hamster skeletons, the size of people. What a turn-up, eh?'

She could see from his rapidly rising eyebrows that he was impressed. Impressed enough, Benny hoped, to offer her something in return.

'Probably connected with the virus,' she said knowledgeably.

'Really?'

Oh come on! This is like talking to Piotr!

'They're probably having them analysed right now to see if they died of it like the other animals did. Still, probably won't help us work out what the virus was all about, eh?' She shook her head. 'That's gonna be a hard one to crack.'

Sikram gave a snort.

'Cracked already,' he said with an air of smugness that told Benny she'd found her way in.

'Really?' She tried to sound incredulous and yet impressed.

'It's all in the reports: the virus interfered with key stages of oogenesis. And the only animals we've found that weren't affected were the majority of the insect-analogues. Mass sterility,' he said blithely, as if he were discussing a football result. 'Dead within a generation.'

Bloody hell!

'And we're sure it's dead?'

Sikram threw her a patronising look.

'Viruses don't die, Ms Maru. They aren't considered alive to start with - they're just complex chemicals that need living cells to reproduce.'

'So the virus isn't dead - neutralised, whatever?' She paused, realising that she was out of her depth.

'Inactivated,' Sikram supplied. 'The planet's saturated with virus fragments - all of them inactivated by a chemical agent that inserts RNA stop sequences into it. Almost a viral anti-virus, you might say.' He lowered his voice, ever so slightly. 'And we think that the virus may have been created by some of the trees! We've isolated a whole series of oligopeptides that seem to be involved in the viral particle formation. Very clever - not something we've come across before. This will open a few eyes, believe me! The replicatory mechanisms, for a start -' Sikram's words were in danger of descending into blah-blah-blah for her.

'Clever?' she interrupted. 'You mean... planned?'

Sikram shook his head.

'There's no evidence that the trees can "plan" anything - that's just a rumour put about by plant scientists to make themselves look more important.'

Benny frowned. 'But you said the trees created the virus?'

Sikram let out the tiniest of sighs. 'They've been using our findings to claim that the trees actively and consciously engineered the virus to wipe out the planet's animal life.'

Benny gawped. 'And did they?'

He gave a noncommittal shrug. 'Whilst there are clear indications that the virus originated in the trees, there's none at all to suggest there was any conscious purpose behind it. It may have been a simple defensive strategy, although its evolutionary value is clearly questionable.'

'I'd say!' whispered Benny. 'What would be *the* point of that?'

'Precisely.' Sikram drew himself up smugly.

'And if the trees are capable of that,' Benny went on, more to herself than to Sikram, 'what else might they be capable of...?'

She caught his eye.

'That's not something I'm prepared to comment on yet,' he said. 'Our findings will be included in the appropriate report.'

'I understand,' she said nodding. 'There's a lot of potential in it, I imagine.' She tried to suppress a sigh. This was going nowhere, and not very quickly,

either.

'So there's been no sighting of Ogosto, then? The security guard.'

'None that I know of. There are only four of us here, so I can easily ask the others. But I think I'd know if a stranger had come in here.'

'I'm sure you would,' thought Benny smugly, remembering how long she'd been here undetected. 'Can't be too careful, though. Considering some of the things you're researching here, we need to be on top of it. If you want to have a quick word with them, I'll wait here.'

Sikram threw her a look lightly dusted with suspicion.

'You'd better wait along here, in my office,' he said, already striding away from her back towards the entrance to the Greenhouse. She followed, irritably, into Sikram's office - the office she'd been in earlier.

'Don't touch anything,' he warned her, glancing momentarily at one particular computer terminal. 'I won't be long.'

Benny waved at a chair, well away from the terminal he'd just glanced at.

'I'll just put my feet up here, shall I?'

She beamed her broadest smile and slumped into the chair with an exaggerated sigh. Oh, for forty winks.

Bleize was not a happy woman.

In the space of half an hour she had lost not only one of her best security guards, but also her brand new archaeologist. And now she had to cope with Piotr - babbling repeatedly that it hadn't been his fault and that there had been something 'wrong' with Ogosto - and a chamber full of the skeletons of what looked like huge hamsters or rats.

The hallway - as she thought of it - that let onto the skeleton room was now full of everyone that had come out from the base that morning. Minus Benny and Ogosto. Luis Vittorino, one of the zoologists, was directing the others in extricating one of the skeletons. He was falling over himself as he supervised the removal of two of the skeletons, alternately scolding and praising his helpers as they managed the tricky job of disentangling the bones from the roots that filled the chamber.

Perhaps it was just the shadow of Ogosto and Benny that hung over everything, not to mention Piotr's repeated worries that 'Everything was going wrong' but finally, she'd had enough of the Pole fretting and generally getting up everyone's noses, and asked one of the security guards to take him back to the base. Unsurprisingly, he didn't argue - especially when Bleize gently pointed out that it would be dark in a few hours, and who knew what things they might have disturbed by unearthing the skeletons.

When she'd first found Piotr, close to tears in the corridor and all alone, and after trying to raise Summerfield on the radio without success, Bleize had taken a couple of the guards with her to find the archaeologist: Piotr had told her that she'd said she was only going a little way up the passage to see what

was there - a desertion of a fellow team member that had Bleize living up to her name. They didn't find the archaeologist, but they found what Bleize took to be her handiwork - a pile of roots and a partly-excavated skeleton in a room with seventeen others. Not only that, but there were another five rooms off the central chamber, each with eighteen alien skeletons.

The scope of the discovery should have staggered Bleize: they'd been on the planet for two months, exploring for nearly four weeks, and this was the first concrete evidence they had of large animal life. The life sciences people had found one or two fossils and a few barely intact bones from smaller mammal- and reptile-analogues. No one had really expected this.

But, fascinating though the skeletons might be to Luis and the other scientists, Bleize was first and foremost an organiser, with an organising mind; and however much the skeletons might advance Hugo's knowledge of the planet, and inform his future plans, to Bleize they were just more things to categorise and to sort. It was Summerfield and Ogosto's disappearance that she was more concerned about.

'Any idea where she might have gone?' Bleize asked a soil-streaked Luis Vittorino as he carried out another armful of bones and unceremoniously dumped them in the central chamber. Lamps had been hung from the roots coating the ceiling, casting a pale, ill light over all of them. Most of the scientists were squatting on their haunches, turning the bones over in their fingers and muttering excitedly about what it all meant.

He shrugged at her question and wiped the hair back from his face with his wrist.

'Obviously somewhere that she thought would be more interesting than this,' he laughed. 'Chasing that guard, I imagine. Calls herself an archaeologist? Ha! More like a private detective!'

Piotr's report of Ogosto's behaviour concerned her too - when she'd finally managed to squeeze it out of him. Just minutes after Summerfield had vanished, Ogosto - according to the little Pole - had groaned and struggled to his feet. He'd seemed confused, perhaps injured (Piotr had said he'd had difficulty standing upright), and had growled something weird at him. When Piotr didn't reply, apparently, Ogosto had said something that sounded angry and had stomped away back up the tunnel, following Summerfield.

The possibility that Ogosto was hurt - he had, after all, taken a large electrical shock - bothered Bleize: Ogosto was one of her men, and she was concerned for each and every one of them. And from what Piotr had said about the way Ogosto had been talking, there was clearly something wrong with him.

She called back to the base and told the scanning team to prepare one of the trackers for release: it was a long shot, sending a flying camera the size of a football out into a dense, unmapped jungle like this, but short of sending everyone from the base out in search parties - and yes, she had considered it - there was little else she could do for now. She held the hope that Ogosto

might make his own way back to the base - but Ogosto's crushed radio, found a few yards down the corridor, made her feel that that was unlikely.

She watched the scientific bods poring over the skeletal remains.

'Anything interesting?' she asked, not even sure that she was bothered about the answer right now.

'This is incredible!' Luis enthused to Bleize, waving a beautifully clean skull around. She flinched, gently pushing him away as he tried to show it to her and explain its dental plates and occipital ridges.

'This is the largest animal we've found here,' he said, flicking his hair back out of his eyes. 'And I think, I really think, they're the ones that made the tunnels. Just look at the brainpan!' He turned the skull over in his slender fingers and started explaining about what was once inside it. 'It's enormous. I mean, until we get these properly scanned and measured, one cannot be certain, but...' He broke off for breath.

'Fascinating,' Bleize said. 'Perhaps we should just concentrate on getting what you need back to the base, Mr Vittorino? It'll be dark soon, as I'm sure you're aware.'

Luis shook his head and grinned, clearly unable to understand how a room full of skeletons didn't excite Bleize as much as it did him. She tried not to let her relief show when her radio buzzed; she stepped aside to answer it.

Benny wasted no time: the moment Sikram had gone, she headed for the terminal that he'd glanced at. But, as she'd half expected, it was password locked. She tried half a dozen like-seeming words related to *the* planet and *the* Greenhouse, but nothing got her in. She wished she'd brought Joseph out with her: he'd probably have been able to hack in.

Benny kept one eye on the door - Sikram was already suspicious of her. Catching her trying to get into the computer wouldn't exactly endear her to him. For the same reason, she decided against having a quiet nose around the rest of the facility - although the thought of stumbling onto some weapons-grade biological experiment hardly tickled her curiosity bone either.

She poked round amongst the papers on the desk - requisition forms, sheets covered with tickboxes and lists of chemical formulae and charts showing... stuff. She half-jumped out of her skin as she heard the door open with a hiss, and was only just lounging nonchalantly on her chair again when Sikram returned.

'Any sign?' she asked brightly, giving an exaggerated stretch.

'No one's seen anything,' he said. There was something else in his voice, something that made her feel suddenly awkward.

'Oh,' she said. 'I'd better be off, then. Bleize won't be too happy if I go home empty-handed.'

She stood up - and could tell that he was struggling to find something to say to her. It only then occurred to Benny that, if Sikram had called the base to

confirm her story, he might have discovered that it wasn't strictly true. Well, wasn't actually true.

'Perhaps you'd like something to eat,' he said. 'Or drink.'

Ohhh-kay..., thought Benny. Alarms bell were ringing. Mr Conviviality was trying to keep her here. He'd put in a call back to the base and they'd told him that she'd gone AWOL and that he had to keep her there until security could be despatched to bring her back.

'I'm fine, thanks. I think I've seen enough here to know that everything's going well.' Was there any point in continuing with the pretence? If it kept him off his guard - and, thought Benny, he hardly looks the type to engage in hand-to-hand fisticuffs - for long enough to make her escape, then yes. She stood up, tugging down her vest.

'I'll let Bleize know that everything's on course,' she said, nodding at him and heading for the door. But he did an oily sideways step, blocking off her retreat.

'Are you sure?' he said. Benny could see the sweat on his brow, despite the cool of the air conditioning. 'Wouldn't you like to meet the rest of the team here?' He tried an awkward, lopsided grin that made him look like he'd had a stroke. 'I'm sure they'd love to meet you.'

Oh I'm sure they would, Benny thought, suddenly realising that even a couple of them could probably bring her down, never mind all four. But then again they were boffin-types, and physical conflict - in her experience - came a close second to personal hygiene in the Boffin's List Of Things To Try Out Today. Not that she liked to stereotype people at all. And however unlikely it was that Bleize would expect her scientists to wrestle Benny to the ground, she didn't want to risk it: she probably already had a healthy jail sentence hanging over her head from the absconding earlier. Goddess only knew what resisting arrest would add to her term; and claiming that she'd lost her radio would seem like a pretty thin excuse, no matter how true it had been.

'Thanks,' Benny said, feinting to the left and then darting right when Sikram slipped in front of her again. She was at the door when she heard him speaking into the comms unit.

'Mr Cotton,' he said, almost stammering. 'Lock the main door, would you?'

Benny slapped the doorplate and was squeezing through the gap before it was even half open. She sprinted down the corridor and activated the inner door of the airlock. Lights cycled on a panel at its side - and then, miraculously, the door hissed open. She jumped in and tapped the controls for the outer door. Of course, she realised, the inner door had to close first, and she'd probably have to go through the whole decontamination process before she'd be let out. Which would give Mr Cotton plenty of time.

Bugger bugger bugger.

She was right. Mr Cotton had done his work. A red light winked above the inner door, which stayed stubbornly closed. And when she turned around to

re-enter the building, the inner door, too, was locked.

At the risk of repeating myself thought Benny disconsolately, *bugger bugger bugger*.

'Ms Maru?' came the nervous little voice from the speaker set into the wall of the airlock.

'I'm sure that this has all been some sort of silly mistake,' said Benny, trying to walk a thin line between 'frosty' and 'this isn't so screwed up that you can't get out of it if you do exactly the right thing exactly right now'.

'Urn... I have instructions, Ms Maru.'

'What instructions? To trap one of Bleize's right-hand women in an airlock?' Hmm... turn up the thermostat a tad, Benny.

'Well, yes.'

'This is going to look so bad on your record, you know.'

'Please don't threaten me, Ms Maru. Like all of us here, I'm only following orders.'

'Oh spare me that one,' Benny snapped, banging her hand on the outer door, wondering how strong it was: if it was just to stop spores and killer cabbages from escaping, it wouldn't have to be that strong, would it?

'Some of Bleize's people will be here soon,' Sikram said. 'I'm sure it can all be sorted out then.'

Benny gritted her teeth but didn't bother to reply. She tried pressing buttons at random - before realising that was a bit silly, and that the sensible route would be to actually read what was written next to them. Ah! Emergency open! She thumbed it vindictively, but nothing happened. Of course: the inestimable Mr Cotton and his inestimable finger on the in-bloody-estimable lock button, somewhere else in the Greenhouse.

So it was back to random pressing - which, whilst it didn't yield any results, at least felt vaguely satisfying. Sikram had either gone, or just didn't have anything more to say to her, so she tried the buttons by the inner door, with identical results.

She let her shoulders fall and slumped against the wall, kicking the outer door spitefully. It didn't budge an inch.

So what was the worst they could do? Lock her up? Sue her for breach of contract? Have her executed under some bizarre corporate form of martial law - or, more likely, have her quietly assassinated for finding out about Tollip's secret weapons research facility?

Hmph. It wasn't going to come to that, she thought grimly, unfastening her rucksack. There had to be something in here that could help. Again she wished she'd brought Joseph out with her. Instead, though, her eyes lit up when she came across her sonic trowel - which looked much like a standard archaeologist's trowel (if there was such a thing) except that it generated a powerful sonic field, perfect for loosening centuries of accumulated soil and

grime and dirt. Maybe she could use it to, erm, pick the lock (the electronic lock, she reminded herself, not the sonic lock - although she'd known other sonic devices that were more than capable of fancy stuff like that).

Oh what the heck!

Benny activated the trowel and, gritting her teeth as the whining from it cut into her brain, she waved it around, magic-wand-like, in front of the control panel for the outer door. Nothing happened - at any rate, nothing she could see. She moved it a bit closer, pressing the tip into the hard plastic wall.

Suddenly, the speaker overhead played a sweet little electronic tune and a woman's beautifully modulated voice said: 'Emergency sterilisation procedure activated.' In equally bright tones, she went on: 'Thirty seconds to sterilisation. Please leave the airlock.' Benny's eyes widened not quite believing that this was happening, as the lovely lady added: 'Severe death hazard.'

By the time she'd had stopped mentally criticizing the woman's English, five of those seconds had gone, and then the realization of what she'd actually *said* sank in. Benny turned to the inner door and began banging on it, hollering at the top of her voice for Sikram to let her out. But there was no reply - either he was standing there, coolly waiting for her to be emergency sterilised, or he'd wandered off to kill another pig. Panic mounting, Benny began kicking madly at the door, resulting in little more than a sprained ankle. As the nice lady let her know that there were now only fifteen seconds left, Benny turned her attention to the outer door, jabbing randomly at the buttons in the belief that she couldn't make things worse, and kicking - with her other foot, this time, and a little more carefully - at the door.

'Ten,' the helpful lady said brightly, adding 'nine, eight, seven...'

Benny wailed again, slamming her shoulder against *the* door, as the woman's voice became somehow ever more loving and evangelical as the numbers became smaller.

'Three,' she said, almost breathily. 'Two.' Benny felt sure that, at this point, the lady had paused for dramatic effect. Or maybe... just maybe... Sikram had managed to abort the -

'One,' said the lady. 'Zero.'

Chapter 6

And as the lady - almost regretfully, thought Benny, now on the point of hysteria and not quite sure what she thought any more, other than that she was about to be emergency sterilised to death - reached the end of her countdown, Benny threw herself against the door one final time.

Just at the moment that the door hissed aside and the damp, loamy air of the jungle rushed in. Benny fell out, straight into the arms of the one person she'd never quite expected to see here.

'Liso!' gasped Benny, still dazed, still running high on adrenalin.

'Benny!' Liso smiled back, steadying her, looking her up and down.

'Thank the Goddess,' Benny said, leaning forwards with her hands on her thighs, taking in deep breaths of jungle whilst behind her, she heard a disturbingly electrical crackle from the airlock and looked over her shoulder to see the chamber glowing with eye-aching ultraviolet light, lightning sparkles dancing around inside it like a trapped summer storm.

'I'm surprised they didn't hear you back at the base,' Liso said, as Benny suggested with vigorous hand movements that it might be an idea to get away from the Greenhouse. Liso led the way, and Benny was glad to let her. She couldn't help but look back again at the blue-glowing doorway, still happily buzzing and snapping away.

Liso had changed hugely from the slightly dumpy, slightly gauche girl that Benny had met all those years ago; but she was hardly recognisable as the worried-looking woman on the video message. Her eyes were bright and cheery. Too bloody cheery, thought Benny, considering their circumstances.

'We thought you were dead,' Benny said when, eventually, they were out of sight of the Greenhouse and paused for a drink of water and a rest.

Liso gave an awkward little shrug.

'Sorry,' she said, almost apologetically. As an understatement, it was pretty good.

'But why? I mean...' Benny gestured around them, confused. 'Why all this? I mean - the running away, the pretending you were missing? Piotr was gutted.'

'Piotr?' Liso looked confused. 'Creepy Piotr?'

'Piotr Volnikov. Geology-Piotr. Pale. Unshaven. That Piotr?'

Liso pulled a face. 'Creepy Piotr.'

'But I thought you were bestest friends.'

'With Piotr?' Liso laughed awkwardly. 'Ewww!'

'Well he certainly has a thing for you: it was him that got me here.'

Liso's face couldn't have been more confused.

'Piotr got you here? Didn't you get my message? The disk?'

'Oh yeah, got that all right.' Benny paused, trying desperately to read Liso's

expression. 'I'm missing something here, aren't I?'

'The first rule of archaeology,' Liso said slowly.

'You said that in your message,' Benny recalled, picturing Liso's face on the screen. 'Sorry... were you trying to tell me something?'

'What's the first rule of archaeology? It was in one of the lectures we went to. What is it?' prompted Liso, clearly trying to hide her disappointment that Benny hadn't got it instantly.

'Context,' said Benny after a few moments' thought, trying to prove she wasn't quite as dim as Liso was probably beginning to think she was. 'It's all about context.'

'Yes....'

Benny shook her head: Liso was trying to lead her somewhere, but she was bugged if she knew where it was. Liso's face fell.

'You didn't find it, did you?'

'What!? Just tell me!'

'It was the packaging. The real message was in the lining of the packaging that the disk came in.'

Benny had a sudden image of the packaging, lying on her desk in her room, alongside her terminal.

'The real message?'

Liso's shoulders sagged but she tried to smile to cover her disappointment.

'Sorry - I was trying to be a bit clever in case someone intercepted it. I wasn't sure who to trust - I asked one of the other workers here, Boonie, who was going back home, to send it on to you. But you said that Piotr contacted you?'

Benny nodded her head slowly, trying to keep up with it all. How dim had she been? Context is everything. The first rule of archaeology. How much else had slipped past her?

'So what exactly was in this message?' Benny wanted to know. 'This much-too-cleverly hidden message.'

Liso directed a pointed gaze at the building that Benny had just escaped from.

'The Greenhouse,' she said. 'The biological weapons.'

'You knew about them?'

'I knew they were testing something in there,' Liso said. 'I was seconded to computer duties for a day and someone had left a file open on their terminal, listing some of the stuff they were testing.' She pulled a tight face at the memory and swallowed hard. 'Horrible stuff. Disgusting. I had to tell someone.' She looked up at Benny, her face apologetic. 'I'm sorry.'

'No, don't be sorry,' Benny said, taking Liso's hand. 'I saw... I saw some of their experiments in there. Some of their weapons - and their results. I'm flattered you thought I'd be able to do anything about it.'

'Well, I didn't really expect you to come, you know: that was just stuff to say

on the vid. I hoped you'd get the hint, tear open the packaging, and see the page of stuff I'd printed out. It wasn't much, but I knew it'd be enough for you to... I don't know... get some strings pulled; get this place investigated. Closed down.' Liso looked away briefly. 'If I'd had the guts I'd have tried to report them myself, but I didn't know how closely they were monitoring the comms channels. But you were saying that Piotr sent you a message too?'

'Yes, Piotr. I got a package from him the day after yours - he'd arranged for me to have a change of name - Anghela Maru - and to come and work here for a week. He arranged it all. He said he was worried about you 'cos you'd disappeared. I think he just wanted me as a private dick.'

Liso was frowning again.

'But... but Piotr? Why him? Why should he be bothered? I mean, we sort of got on, but only professionally. To be quite honest, he gave me the creeps. D'you reckon he's had the secret hots for me?' Liso's eyes were wide. 'Maybe he had some sort of obsession with me?'

'Or maybe our creepy little Piotr isn't everything he makes out he is....'

'What d'you mean?'

'Probably just me being paranoid.' Benny shook her head. 'D'you think anyone else knows about what's going on here?'

Liso gave a shrug.

'Lots of people know it exists, and they can't all be daft enough to think it's just about growing bigger courgettes. I don't think most people would talk about it, even if they knew. There's an unhealthy paranoia back at the base - you might have sensed it.'

'Janny mentioned the Greenhouse,' said Benny. 'I think a few people have probably got wind of the sort of thing they're doing, you know.' She shook her head again, feeling dirty for even talking about the place. 'They've got some horrible stuff in there, Liso. Mould spores that turn a live pig into a mass of uck in a few hours, and Goddess-only knows what else. There must be half a dozen rooms in there I didn't get to look into.'

Liso nodded.

'I saw the list,' she said. 'I know.' She paused and took hold of Benny's hand.

'But the Greenhouse isn't the amazing thing here, Benny.' A bright, zealous light came on in her eyes. 'There's stuff on this planet you wouldn't dream of. They've worked out that a virus killed all the animal life off 8,000 years ago - did you know that? - but that's just the half of it.'

'I knew it,' said Benny bitterly. 'I bet they're trying to revive the virus, aren't they?'

'I wouldn't put it past them, but that's not what I meant. There's something I need to show you first.'

Benny glanced back at the Greenhouse.

'But what about that? We need to do something about it, sabotage it or...'

'That can wait - I saw you coming out of the tunnels. Have you seen the skeletons?'

'The hammies? You've seen them too?'

'Hammies?' Liso laughed. That's what you've called them, is it?'

'Well, it's as good a name as any.'

'I'm sure they'll be amused.'

'Who will...?' Benny stared at her, her mouth dropping open. 'You mean...'

'Got it in one,' Liso answered, her eyes bright. 'The hammies are still alive!'

Benny's head was reeling: in the space of a few hours she'd seen Ogosto hit by alien electricity and then recover - sort of - and discovered human-sized hamster skeletons; and then she'd found a biological weapons research centre and the missing person that she'd come here to find. And now she'd discovered that the supposedly long-dead hammies were still alive.

Her mind spun with the possibilities, the implications, as she followed Liso through the jungle: were the hammies connected to the electrical discharges? Were they hiding somewhere in the jungle, sending them out, somehow, as weapons against the humans? Were they actually aiding Tollip? And why had Ogosto acted so strangely? And, perhaps more to the point, what had Liso been doing since her disappearance, and how did she know so much about the hammies? *Tune in next week to find out....*

The light was dimming slightly, and Benny remembered that the planet had a twenty-six-hour day (or was it twenty-seven? Why did she never pay attention to these things?). She checked her watch. Probably about two or three hours until it got completely dark.

'Where are we going?' she asked Liso, still hurrying ahead. 'To meet the hammies?'

Liso glanced back over her shoulder with a sly grin.

'Something like that.'

'Oh,' added Benny, 'and why have you got no top on? Not that I have a problem with gratuitous semi-nudity... just interested, that's all.' She remembered Janny's lack of modesty back at the base, and wondered if this was something that the planet did to you: after a month, would she, too, find herself throwing off her clothes willy-nilly? Perhaps one of those stories best not to tell Jason about. He could get very excitable about things like that.

'Ah,' said Liso. 'That's Morweningart. Prefers me like this.'

Benny blanched slightly: not that she wanted to be judgemental, but the thought that Liso would go flinging her bra into the jungle at the say-so of some bloke rather offended her supposed feminist principles. For some reason, Jason popped into her head again.

'Who's he when he's at home?' she asked Liso.

'Morweningart? Oh,' said Liso blithely, but with a twinkle in her eye. 'Morweningart's a she. You'll meet her soon.'

Benny's mouth formed a silent little 'o'. This was getting curiouser and curiouser.

Sikram's horror at discovering that Ms Maru had somehow triggered the emergency sterilisation routine was only slightly tempered by the fact that, once it had run its course and the doors had been opened, there was no charred, slightly smoking body to be found. The outer door had clearly been opened from the jungle - either a malfunction or a design flaw that Sikram was definitely going to report to Bleize.

Still, it did mean that Maru was still alive. As he checked the inside of the airlock for damage, he was surprised when the outer door was opened. He turned, expecting Maru to be there. Unfortunately for him, it wasn't.

Liso stopped at the crest of a slight slope that encircled a gentle concavity hundreds of yards across. Taking up most of the area was a strange sort of mini-jungle - a wild, dense thicket, a tangle of trees, dark and polished, growing so close together that their boles grew into each other and then apart, weaving and twisting around in a curiously intimate way, leaving dark cavities and passages into the interior. She followed the thicket - if it could be called that - up with her eyes, and realised that it went all the way to the top of the jungle canopy - and on, even further.

'Impressive,' she said, noticing that Liso was watching her for a reaction. Liso took her hand. 'Come on,' she said with a smile, and led Benny towards it.

As they drew closer, she began to realise that, contrary to initial appearances, it wasn't a thicket of trees: it was a single tree, somehow made up of dozens - no, hundreds, maybe thousands - of trunks, all growing together. She could see how, as the individual parts grew upwards, they blended into each other, creating thicker trunks for a while, until they grew apart again and joined with others. It was weird - weird and strangely sinister.

'What is it?' asked Benny, now feeling quite awestruck as they stood at the base of it and stared upwards.

'It's incredible Benny, it really is.' Liso reached out to touch it, stroking the shiny, chestnut-coloured bark of one of the boles almost lovingly. 'We call it the Tree of Life.'

'We? Who's we?'

Liso didn't answer. She'd closed her eyes. After a couple of seconds, she seemed to stagger, falling against the tree as if she'd fainted. Benny stepped forwards to catch her, but she suddenly jolted awake again, her eyes wide open.

Liso turned to Benny - but there was something different about her posture. She seemed hunched over slightly - and Benny was reminded of Ogosto, back in the tunnels.

'Liso?'

Liso tipped her head back and stared up at the green canopy before looking Benny in the eye.

'My name is Morweningart,' she said slowly. 'Welcome to our world.'

And before Benny could stop her, Liso took hold of her hand and pressed it against the trunk of the tree. She could only stare in mute astonishment as the jungle around her began to mutate....

Chapter 7

It was like some bizarre children's TV programme.

Benny was now standing in a beautiful woodland glade, short grass beneath her feet, perfect blue sky visible between the leaves of the trees above her. And everywhere, scampering hither and thither, were bloody great big hamsters.

They didn't have fur like hamsters back on Earth - it looked more like soft, matt leather, shaded from purple, through to blue and green and grey. Their bright eyes, much larger than hamsters' eyes, were a gorgeous indigo, and they had no whiskers. Some of them trundled along on all fours, trotting in an oddly catlike way; others walked on their hind legs. There were groups playing together, older ones and little baby ones that Benny just wanted to put in her pocket and take home. She watched three or four of the babies playing some sort of game that involved one of them scrabbling up the trunk of a nearby tree and jumping onto its playmates. The air felt cooler and drier, and even though Benny knew that none of this was real, she couldn't help but take in a deep breath of the sweet, foresty air.

'Beautiful, isn't it?' said a voice at her side.

A hammie stood there, its head pushed forwards as it blinked its purple eyes at her.

'Morw... sorry, I've forgotten your name.'

'Morweningart.'

'What is this? Where am I?'

'You're in the Tree of Life, in our eternal dream. Come on - let me show you.'

Morweningart trotted off, an odd, bouncing walk that looked vaguely comical. Benny followed. No one seemed to pay much attention to her: could they see her? Did she appear to them as another hammy?

Morweningart led Benny down a grassy slope to the edge of the clearing - from where she could see mile after mile of countryside, green and fertile and idyllic, laid out before her. It really *was* like a scene from a children's programme - impossibly beautiful, impossibly bright and fresh. Peter would have loved it. Benny just wanted to cry. Of course, it then occurred to her that she could simply be experiencing some drug-induced hallucination: something in the bark of the tree, absorbed through her skin. Or maybe, back at the Greenhouse, she'd been infected with a mind-altering bio-weapon. For all Benny knew, she might really be sucking on her thumb, sitting in a corner of a lab in a puddle of her own wee.

'This is how it was,' Morweningart said, with just a trace of wistfulness in her voice. 'Millennia ago. We had everything we could want. Unlike you, we had nothing that you would see as technology, nothing to interfere or spoil or pervert our environment. Everything was in balance.'

'Until the virus,' said Benny with a nod, remembering what Sikram had told her. 'Until the trees killed you.'

Morweningart spun round, pulling her upper lip back and making a strange throaty noise.

'The trees what?'

'Didn't the trees kill you? We found the skeletons - the chambers in the tunnels.' Or had Sikram and his butchers got it all wrong?

Morweningart tipped her head back and let out what sounded like a howl of rage; Benny flinched, wondering what she'd said that had angered her so much.

'That is so funny!' said Morweningart eventually. 'The trees killed us, did they?'

'Well didn't they? Didn't they cause the virus, somehow? Or take advantage of it?'

Morweningart did a strange sideways wobble with her head.

'No no - at least not in the way you probably think.' She paused and stared at Benny again. 'The trees....?' She laughed again, that slightly frightening, howling laugh.

Benny was confused 'So they didn't kill you? The trees, the plants?'

Morweningart's nose twitched slightly and she leaned forwards.

'The trees *saved* us, Benny.'

'Saved you? How?'

Morweningart tipped her head on one side and then turned away, reaching out for Benny's hand.

'Let me show you,' she said.

Benny looked down the slope: the soft sunlight that had previously illuminated the scene was gone. Instead, heavy clouds were gathering overhead, piling up in fast-motion, turning the fairy-tale woodland glade into something altogether more sinister. The hammies down there had stopped playing and were all up on their back legs, like meerkats, their heads jerking from side to side as if they sensed danger.

Suddenly, out of the trees, came a pack of apes - four of them. Their fur was striped in grey and black, like zebras, and their faces were horribly human. As they galloped across the grass on all fours, they screeched dementedly, lips pulled back to reveal glistening yellow teeth.

The hammies scattered, squeaking and chittering, but they weren't fast enough. Two apes caught one of them and Benny looked away instinctively as they began to tear it apart with their bare hands, its screams echoing through the forest.

'Stop it!' cried Benny. 'I get it, I get it!'

She looked back and found that the scene was just as it had been before: sunny and tranquil, the hammies playing as if the apes had never been there.

'What were they?'

'Our only threat,' Morweningart said. Benny realised that she still had hold of her paw. 'I said that we had an idyllic existence, and for the most part it was true. We developed a closely symbiotic relationship with the planet, with the trees and the plants - particularly the Trees of Life. They provided medicines for us, drugs, food. We selectively bred them over hundreds of generations. They became almost...' She paused. 'Almost sentient. The apes were our only predators - they moved out from the equatorial regions and began to encroach on our territories. They were vicious killers and we became scared. So, at our behest, the Trees modified an existing virus, hoping to limit their numbers. It interfered with egg production. A form of enforced contraception. We didn't want to wipe the apes out, just keep their numbers down, perhaps drive them back to the equatorial regions. But we - the Trees and us - got it wrong.'

Again, Benny remembered Sikram's words back at the Greenhouse.

'And the virus wiped out all animal life?'

'Most of it, yes. By the time we realised our mistake, it was too late. Only a few of the insects survived, and one or two other species that died out because they preyed on other animals that the virus did kill.'

Benny was horrified. All animal life wiped out by a simple virus, and no way for them to leave the planet, no spaceships - no 'technology'.

'The Trees desperately tried to synthesise an antidote, an antiviral. They tried to interfere with the virus itself. But it was too late. We realised that the end was coming.' Morweningart's voice had become thin and distant. Benny looked around her at the playful, gentle hammies and suddenly felt choked up.

'But you survived,' she said. 'Somehow you survived.'

'Our relationship with the Trees of Life had progressed so far... they were part animal, we were part plant.' Morweningart stuck out her stubby little arm and pointed out the fuzzy green patches in the soft leather of her skin. 'Chloroplasts - the Trees taught us how to photosynthesise. And we taught them how to think.'

'The Trees actually think?'

The hammy gave a funny little wriggle that Benny interpreted as a 'sort of' shrug.

'They aren't bright, and they think very, very slowly. But yes, they do think. Not in the same way that you or I do. For hundreds of years, when one of our elders died, the Trees stored their minds so that they could continue to advise us. When we realised that we couldn't stop the virus - not before it had wiped us all out - we persuaded the Trees to grow extra brain tissue.'

Benny felt her skin prickle - trees with animal brains inside them. This was starting to sound creepy.

'And then they used it to store your minds?'

Morweningart wiggled her head again: yes.

It all clicked!

'That explains the skeletons and the chambers!'

Morweningart looked confused.

'They were ceremonial, weren't they? That explains the layout, the equal numbers of skeletons in each chamber.' Benny pulled a face. The most eminent archaeologist in the sector and I didn't see the similarities between your ceremonial chambers and the death vaults on Chook. Duh!'

'We had faith in the Trees' ability to find a cure for the virus one day. But as I said before, they think exceedingly slowly. We didn't know how long we might stay in our dream, in here. The skeletons you would have found were the last of us - the very last. The ones who waited until the final moments, just in case, by some miracle, the Trees found a way to stop the virus. We expected it would take centuries for the Trees to make it safe for us to return and to reincorporate....'

There was something in Morweningart's voice that sounded hesitant, unsure.

'You sound like something went wrong?' Benny said. 'They say the virus has probably been dead, or dormant, for hundreds if not thousands of years. Wasn't it part of the plan that you'd stay asleep for all that time?'

'We asked the Trees to keep working on a cure for the virus, and to wake us and reincorporate us when they had done. But... like I said, the Trees aren't very bright, and their thinking is very slow.' Morweningart paused. 'They didn't wake us.'

Benny almost laughed at the twisted irony of it all.

'You overslept?'

'It was only your arrival that woke the Trees. They misread your chemical signatures - they thought we'd somehow returned.'

'The Trees thought you were back,' Benny continued, 'and started sending out signals? The static discharges?'

Although she wasn't yet confident of being able to read the hammy's body language, Benny was sure that Morweningart suddenly looked awkward and evasive.

'What is it?'

Morweningart said nothing and Benny knew there was something going on.

'What aren't you telling me? It's about the...' Her voice tailed off as, suddenly, all the bits and pieces suddenly came together in one of those eureka! moments.

'The pulses weren't just signals, were they? They were hammy minds, or bits of them. Copies or something. Brain waves, transmitted through the roots.' The room in the Greenhouse with the huge, wormlike root ranged on the trolleys, came back to her. 'That's what's happened to Ogosto. He isn't Ogosto any more, is he? He's a hammy!'

Bleize could really do without this: the disappearance of Ogosto and Benny Summerfield, never mind the discovery of the skeletons, had suddenly multiplied up her workload fourfold. And then a call from Sikram at the Greenhouse that Summerfield was there....

Bleize had grabbed four of the security guards, two that had already been out with the expedition and another two she'd sent for from the base - Mitchell, Tanaka, Forster and Leighton - and had set off for the Greenhouse, having been assured by Sikram that he'd hold Summerfield there until she got there. The scientists back at the skeletons probably couldn't be trusted not to make a mess of the whole affair, but she couldn't babysit everyone all the time. And Summerfield was, for the security of the mission here, a more pressing matter.

This whole matter needed to be sorted quickly - if she let it run out of control, the whole project could be threatened, particularly if Summerfield had been poking her nose into things. Sikram hadn't said much - just that he had her there and he'd hold her until Bleize arrived. As they headed through the jungle, Bleize wondered whether five of them wasn't overkill. But there was Ogosto to consider, too. If Summerfield had followed him, there was a chance that he, too, was somewhere around the Greenhouse. Perhaps the two of them were working together. That was a worrying thought, particularly in light of what Piotr had said about Ogosto's 'accident' with the static.

Bleize's years of training, though, had taught her that there were no such things as 'accidents': there was deliberate action, there was carelessness and there were unforeseen circumstances. 'Accidents' were what people who hadn't thought ahead blamed for their failures and their mistakes. She didn't accept failures and mistakes, either from herself or from anyone else.

Unfortunately, this situation needing nipping in the bud: she didn't want the first failure on Tollip's World to be hers.

As Bleize caught sight of the base, something struck her as being wrong, and she motioned the guards back into the shadow of a tree. The door to the facility looked to be open. She couldn't be sure at this distance, but some sixth sense was tugging at the back of her brain.

'Something's not right,' she whispered, motioning them forwards, spreading out wide to either side of her. They slipped through the jungle as silently as the undergrowth allowed, but Bleize was under no illusions that, if there was someone keeping an eye out, they'd make it to the building without being seen.

She'd been right about the door: it stood open. A malfunction? Keeping as low as she could, Bleize raced for the door, hearing Leighton and Mitchell either side of her and Tanaka and Forster behind, keeping her covered. Only as she reached the building did she realise why the door was open: lying, half in and half out of the building was a body. Sprawled on his back, neck bent at

an angle that spoke instantly of the cause of death, was Sikram.

She knelt, checked his pulse on the offchance that he was still alive, and waved the security guards in.

Surely Summerfield wouldn't - couldn't - have done this, could she? She hadn't struck Bleize as the killer type. But she couldn't ignore the evidence of a man with a broken neck.

'If she's in there,' Bleize said quietly, 'I want her alive. If she's responsible for this, she's going to answer to me.'

The guards nodded, hefting their pistols meaningfully, as Bleize stepped into the airlock. They had to drag Sikram's body out into the jungle to be able to access the inner door. Once inside, in the eerie cool and calm, Bleize motioned for the guards to check the nearest rooms. Nothing. If Summerfield had got this far, then no doubt she had found out about the Greenhouse's purpose and the projects being undertaken. They had to be very careful - there were dangerous materials in this place, and it wasn't beyond the bounds of possibility that Summerfield might be intending to use some of them as weapons herself. Bleize briefly considered taking some time to find haz-suits, but realised that that would take up valuable time and would impede their movements if it came to a fight.

They moved on down the corridor, passing the lab with the spore experiment. Again, there was no one around. Bleize realised that it was possible that the other four staff members had barricaded themselves in one of the upper level rooms to avoid Summerfield; but if that were the case, she'd have expected them to have sent out a call to the main base. The fact that no communications had been received from here since Sikram had reported Summerfield's arrival spoke disturbing volumes about what might have happened. They'd find out soon enough.

It turned out that they found out almost immediately: flattening herself against the corridor wall, she stole a peek into the 'root room' as it was unofficially called - and immediately saw the bodies.

A woman's body hung limply over one of the trolleys, her arms dangling down so that her fingers trailed on the floor; two motionless feet jutted out from behind a bank of equipment.

'Shit,' she hissed to the guards, letting them see what she'd seen. She adjusted her grip on her own pistol and nodded at them, silently counting down from three.

On one, she slapped the touchplate at the side of the door and threw herself into the room, almost skidding on the smooth, plastic floor, and bringing herself back up on the far side of the room. Behind her, she heard Forster, Tanaka, Leighton and Mitchell follow her in.

At first glance, the room looked empty-with the exception of another body, slumped up against a bank of instruments, the neck clearly broken again. Was Summerfield really so strong that she could have done this? But then she

caught sight of movement in the pit at the centre of the room from where the wormlike bulk of the root issues, still trailed around the room on the trolleys.

'Summerfield?' challenged Bleize. 'Come up now!'

But it wasn't Benny's head that slowly appeared above the plants that surrounded the hole. It was Ogosto's.

'Ogosto?' Bleize was shocked - that Ogosto might have had something to do with the deaths of the scientists hadn't occurred to her. Maybe he'd just come along after Summerfield, and found them all dead. 'What the hell's going on, Ogosto?'

She relaxed the grip on her pistol and manoeuvred her way through the trolleys, instruments and cables, ducking under the root to reach the edge of the pit. Ogosto was half-standing half-crouching in the centre of it, one hand on the grubby, soil-streaked base of the root as it exited the soil. His eyes were bright but his forehead was furrowed, as if Bleize's presence here had confused him. And he was naked. Stark staring naked.

'What happened?' Bleize said, gesturing around the room at the bodies. 'Did Summerfield do this? I mean,' said Bleize, realising that Ogosto wouldn't have known Summerfield's real name, 'Maru - Anghela Maru. Did she do this?'

Ogosto looked around the room, following Bleize's hand gestures, as if he didn't quite understand what she was saying: was he in shock? And why was he in the bottom of the pit with no clothes on?

She saw his hand contract, digging his dark fingers into the anaemic mass of the root, almost as thick as his own body, and started as the equipment at her side jumped into life, issuing a series of musical tones overlaid with a static-like hiss. Bleize opened her mouth to ask if he'd done that, when he lifted his head and stretched out his hand.

Something in his movement triggered an alarm in Bleize and she stepped back - as a flood of bluish light sprang from his open fingers, washing over the room. She tripped on a cable and went stumbling onto her backside as the wave of energy thundered over her head, slewing around as Ogosto pointed at the three guards. As Bleize went down, she saw all four of them caught full in the blast and crumple to their knees before collapsing completely.

As the energy blast faded, Bleize sprang to her feet, her pistol in her hand.

'What the hell are you doing?' she cried at Ogosto - who seemed surprised to see her still on her feet. She half-expected him to repeat the trick, but he didn't - instead, he stared at the gun in her hand as if puzzled by it, and began to climb out of the pit.

'Stay there,' she warned, waving the gun at him. He took no notice, continuing to haul himself up the shallow incline, looking suddenly tired and drained.

'No more warnings,' she said, levelling the gun at him. And, as he reached for the rim of the pit and began to heave his bulky form out, she pulled the

trigger.

Nothing happened. Bleize stared at the gun incredulously and tried again: absolutely nothing. Had the energy blast damaged it? Ogosto was almost out of the pit, a malevolent grin plastered across his face as he realised that she was defenceless. In frustration, Bleize threw the gun, but it bounced ineffectively off the giant's chest. Bleize looked across the room to where Leighton, Forster and Mitchell were moaning and shaking their heads. Tanaka was still out cold on the floor.

'Mitchell!' she barked. 'Leighton! Get up!'

Her outburst seemed to check Ogosto, who paused in his climb to watch the response of the two guards. Bleize took the opportunity to sprint around the room to them, helping to heave Mitchell to his feet. Ogosto just looked on, and Bleize wondered briefly whether his mind had been damaged by the static pulse in the tunnel: he didn't seem to grasp that once the two guards were revived, it wouldn't be long before he was pinned to the floor by them.

Mitchell frowned down at Bleize as Leighton struggled to his feet, making a curious guttural noise.

'Does your gun work?' hissed Bleize, glancing back to check that Ogosto was still at the pit's edge. Mitchell didn't answer, but stared at the gun curiously, as though trying to remember what it was for.

'Oh for God's sake,' hissed Bleize, snatching it from him. She wheeled around, pointed it at Ogosto and pulled the trigger. Nothing.

'Take him down,' Bleize said in frustration, tossing *the* gun to the floor.

Forster and Mitchell just stared at her. She pointed to Ogosto.

'Both of you - I want him down. Now!'

Neither of them moved. Had the blast stunned them so badly? She looked at Ogosto who was smiling that weird, feral grin, his upper lip pulled back to reveal sparkling white teeth.

'Get her,' he grunted.

Bleize turned - not so much because of Ogosto's words, which hadn't quite registered, but because Mitchell had raised a hand towards her. She took a step back, totally confused.

'What are you doing?'

Mitchell didn't answer. Instead, he smiled - that same, creepy, Ogosto smile - and reached out for her.

Bleize took one last look at Leighton, further around the room, who was now advancing on her, and decided that discretion was *the* better part of valour. In seconds she was sprinting back down the corridor towards the exit.

'His name is Assapartemya,' said Morweningart. 'He now uses the body of the human.'

'But why?' asked Benny. 'I mean, what for? Why's he done it?'

'He's a malcontent - you might say rebel, but that makes him sound more

honourable than he is. Even when we were corporate, he was not happy. We had a... a very democratic system of government, you might say. Through the intermediaries of the Trees, we sought to reach consensus on all matters that concerned us. Assapartemya was impatient - consensus, as opposed to the democracy that I understand from Liso many human societies employ, can be a slow and painful process. It suited the Trees, too: as I told you, they are not quick thinkers. They ponder slowly and deeply, often taking many weeks or months to reach relatively simple decisions. For Assapartemya, that was too long. He tried to convince us that we did not need the Trees to be part of that consensus, that we alone were necessary for the decisions we needed to make to run our society.' There was a note of regret in Morweningart's voice. 'When the virus came, he blamed our consensual government for being slow to react to the threat it posed. By the time that we realised there was nothing to be done, he had built up quite a retinue around him, others who thought like him. Dangerous times breed radicals. But, like all of us, he had few choices: he either survived by entering the dream, or - like many did - he allowed himself full death from the virus.'

'He chose the dream.'

Morweningart nodded slowly.

'So how did he get out? That trick with the static - how did he manage that?'

'We didn't realise it at the time - even now, we are only slowly piecing together Assapartemya's actions in the dream - but he didn't enter as fully into it as we did. He and his... supporters... they somehow held back from entering it fully. Whilst time passed quickly for those of us fully dreaming, it passed more slowly for him. He had the chance to plot. And he forged a particular bond with the Tree. I described them as slow - they are stupid by some standards. The Tree in which he dreamed - one of the two others - was taken in by him. He persuaded it to experiment with the bioelectrical fields that it generated, the fields that would eventually be used to reincorporate us.'

'And the Tree found a way to copy Assapartemya's mind into the static discharges.'

'Until you came to our world, the experiments could come to nothing: there were no other suitable life forms upon which to impress his pattern. He sent copies of it out many times, so the Tree tells us now, but they faded into the ground, lost. And then, whilst we were still sleeping, your friend - Ogosto? - made contact, and Assapartemya was reborn.'

'So the Assapartemya in Ogosto is just a copy, then? Not the original? And how many of them are there, that support him?'

'It would take time to find out - not more than a handful,' Morweningart said. 'I imagine they share his views, support his plans.'

'And what are those plans?' asked Benny.

'We know as little as you.'

'Can't you ask him? I mean, he's somewhere in there, right - in the other

Tree? You obviously have some sort of contact with it. Can't you force him to tell you - the original, I mean?'

'Force him?'

'Yes,' insisted Benny. 'Force him. Blackmail him, threaten him - whatever. Tell him you'll, I dunno, delete him, if he doesn't tell you.'

'That's not the way we do things, Benny.'

'But he's back there,' said Benny firmly, trying not to shout - although none of the other hammies around her seemed even to notice that she'd raised her voice. 'Doing Goddess-knows what.'

'Has he harmed anyone?'

'How should I know? But wouldn't it be better to stop him before he does? I mean, far be it from me to prejudge him as a psycho nutter, but you've already said he was a bit... flaky. And now he's gone and stolen someone's body. Hardly the actions of a Good Samaritan.'

'Then you must sort that out with him.'

'That's what I want to do.'

'But the Assapartemya still in the dream is not the Assapartemya in your base.'

'He bloody well is! How can you say he's different? It's the same personality, the same mind behind it, whether he's stealing other people's bodies or in your dream. You can't just say "Oh, it's not the same person" and leave it at that.'

Morweningart sighed - and Benny felt a quite understandable urge to shake her.

'You don't understand our society, Benny. We have been through this issue before in our history: we do not hold the original responsible for the behaviour of the corporates.'

'The children are not guilty of the sins of the fathers and all that,' grunted Benny, not at all happy with the way this was turning out. 'But this is different: these aren't children and parents. It's the same bloody *person*!'

'This is not the first time that those who have gone to dream in the Trees have been reincorporated,' Morweningart argued gently. 'It does not happen often, but sometimes, when an individual is badly injured, they may choose disincorporation - and then reincorporation later. There have been many occasions and the reincorporates have not always gone on to be like their originals. It may not be your way - but it is ours.'

'So you're saying you can't do anything? Nothing at all. We have a madman running around out here, who's stolen the body of one of us and is quite probably planning something nasty, and you can't ask your Assapartemya what he's up to?'

'We can ask - but we cannot insist that he tells us; we cannot threaten him.'

'Great!' Benny threw her hands up. 'One of your lot takes over one of us, and all you can do is knock on his door and say "Excuse me - could you tell us

what you're up to? No problem if you can't, but just thought we'd ask."

'Please, Benny - please try to understand. It's not our way to do as you ask. We sympathise and we will help you all we can, but force and coercion are not our way.'

'Well I bet they're Assapartemya's way.' Benny paused and tried to smother down the angry fire that was burning her up, realising that maybe - just maybe - she was overreacting. After all, what had Assapartemya really done? Stolen - borrowed, perhaps - Ogosto's body and then run away. Hardly a hanging offence. 'Maybe you're right - maybe Assapartemya isn't a bad guy. Although if he's been scheming away inside there for millennia, who knows what he's planning.'

'Your priorities are different to ours, Benny. I don't know if we can really trust each other. Liso has shown me how much duplicity your people are capable of.'

'And Assapartemya has shown me just a little of how much your people are,' Benny countered, feeling defensive in the face of Morweningart's reluctance to quiz Assapartemya. 'Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to get out of here.'

She glanced around at the woodland idyll and shuddered, realising how artificial it all suddenly felt.

And then, instantly, she was back in her own body, sitting up against the base of the Tree of Life.

Liso looked down at her, and as soon as she saw that she was back, crouched down and took her hand.

'Well?' she said with a smile.

'No,' grumped Benny. 'Not really.' She struggled to her feet, her own body feeling strangely light and insubstantial after being a hammy.

'Why?'

'Ogosto's been possessed by a hammy called Assapartemya, and Morweningart refuses to help us find out what he's after.'

Liso frowned.

'Why?'

'Because "It's not their way" - shorthand for "We can't be arsed".'

Benny pulled out her flask and took another sip of water, realising how little of it she had. She looked up at the jungle canopy: it was noticeably darker than it had been before she'd entered the hammy dream. She checked her watch.

'Come on,' she said determinedly. 'I want to get back to the base, find out what Ogosto - Assapartemya - has been up to.'

'What about Morweningart?'

'What about her?'

Liso just waved her hands vaguely.

'I mean... she could come with us.'

'How?'

Liso tapped the side of her head.

'In here.'

'Like Ogosto and Assapartemya?'

'Not quite - it's different if it's voluntary: it's more like a houseshare. Morweningart quite likes it.'

'Doesn't get out much, does she?' Benny said gruffly. 'Literally or metaphorically.' She thought about it for a second and shook her head. 'I'm sure Morweningart's just doing what she thinks is right, but at the moment, I'd rather not feel like I'm having to keep an eye on you. You know what I mean?'

Liso nodded grudgingly.

'If Assapartemya can take over Ogosto, maybe Morweningart's not telling the entire truth about sharing your body with you. We've still got all this Greenhouse weapons business to sort, never mind Assapartemya. Watching out for you going all hammy on me is just one more thing I don't need. Is that okay?'

'It's okay,' she said. 'I know what you mean. Come on - let's get back. I expect they're going to be surprised enough by your return, never mind mine.'

'Oh, I think I can expect a twenty-one-gun salute when I get back,' Benny smiled grimly. 'With the guns pointed straight at my head.'

The trip back to the base seemed to take forever - and, even more than before, Benny felt the jungle around her was watching them, silent, purple eyes peering out from every bush and tree. After all, she reasoned - despite Liso's insistence that the plants didn't have sensory organs - if the Trees of Life possessed brains, why not eyes or ears? Every time she crunched down on a bush or irritably kicked aside a snagging creeper, she wondered whether the plants weren't secretly feeding the information back to the Trees, making mental notes to get their own back on her later. Her sense of paranoia grew, and when she caught Liso looking at her out of the corner of her eye, she began to wonder whether Morweningart hadn't secretly stayed inside her.

She told herself not to be so suspicious, and that it was just the heat getting to her.

Liso told her about her four days in the jungle - how she'd found the Greenhouse but had kept well away from it; how she'd found the Tree of Life and had started to examine it, only to find herself transferred to HammyLand. Her first thoughts had been that she was hallucinating -but after she'd met and spoken to Morweningart, she'd begun to realise that it was all true. In return - warily, she admitted - she'd let Morweningart 'borrow' her body so that she could see what the planet was like now. The hammy had been a little depressed to find how wild the jungle had grown: as Benny had seen in the dream, 8,000 years ago it was more like gentle woodland than the steaming tropics. The Trees hadn't, Morweningart concluded, managed the planet quite as well as they'd hoped.

The hammy had guided Liso to trees where she'd found huge bunches of edible fruits, orange-sized fruits that tasted like grapes that had not only slaked her hunger but also her thirst. And for a while, Liso admitted, she'd toyed with the idea of staying out in the jungle for good. But after a while she'd got bored - especially when she heard and saw Benny's shuttle arrive and wondered whether her message had been received.

Liso told her more about the hammies' culture, and about how the Trees of Life took an active part in hammy reproduction. Benny pulled a face when Liso explained that the female hammies deposited eggs in the Trees which were then fertilised by the males and 'modified' by the Trees before being returned to the females for gestation. There was a remarkable degree of genetic transfer between the hammies and the Trees - so much so, it seemed to Benny, that she wasn't sure whether the hammies should really be considered animals at all: they seemed much more hybrids of animal and plant.

The green, leafy sky above them was darkening rapidly as the base came into sight, and Benny paused.

'How are we going to play this?'

'Our, ahem, absences you mean?'

Benny nodded.

'We could make up some mad, unbelievable story.'

'Which they wouldn't believe.'

'Or we could tell them the truth.'

'Which they'd be only too happy to believe as they locked us up and threw away the key, laughing.'

Benny sighed.

'What we really need to do is to get a message offworld somehow.'

'Is that a problem?'

Benny told her about the communications blackout that had come into effect just before she'd left. The expedition to the tunnels seemed days ago, and she realised quite how tired she was.

'Ahh,' said Liso. 'That is a problem.'

'What about Piotr?' Benny cried. 'Can't we get him to do something? Hack into the communications doodahs, send a message to Brax. Assuming, of course,' she added, 'that he's not in this whole thing up to his neck.'

'Who's Brax?'

Benny explained about Irving Braxiatel and the Collection.

'If there's one person with the influence to get us out of here and to stop the research that Tollip's doing, it's Brax.'

'Not sure that Piotr's your man, though,' Liso said dubiously.

Benny hummed in thoughtful agreement and then grinned. 'But I do know someone who might be our man!'

'What are we waiting for, then? Lead on!'

And, suddenly buoyed at the thought of seeing Joseph again, Benny strode forwards - only to stop after two paces.

'On second thoughts,' she said, 'is there a back entrance we could use?'

Piotr chewed at the back of his finger and just knew that he'd get into big trouble.

Since Bleize had sent him back, he'd drunk far too much coffee, spent far too much time in the lab doing absolutely nothing, and was getting on far too many people's nerves. First Liso, now Benny. What was happening? And where had Ogosto gone? Part of him felt annoyed to have been left out of it; the other - rather larger - part simply felt glad to be back inside the safe confines of the base. And a tiny part of him - although growing the more he thought about it, and the more he realised that it had contributed to Benny's disappearance - felt very, very guilty for lying to her. Almost as much as he felt angry at her for dumping him back in the tunnels. Piotr was under no illusion that Benny was his new, bestest chum; but to just leave him and go chasing off after Ogosto... He'd have a few words to say to the great Professor Summerfield when he saw her. If he saw her.

He had more coffee and realised that his hands were shaking. Perhaps he should find Bleize, have a word with her - tell her how bad he was feeling about all of this. Not that that would make Benny reappear.

He sat down at his desk, pointedly refusing to talk to any of the other scientists until they stopped talking to him, and wondered what he should do. He ran over the events around Liso's disappearance, wondering whether there was anything he'd missed, anything that might help find her.

And then he remembered that Bleize had asked him whether he'd seen Liso with a disk before she'd disappeared.

It had seemed a bit odd at the time - but then again *everything* had seemed a bit odd. Bleize hadn't pressed the matter, but said that if he came across a data disk lying about anywhere, he was to make sure it went straight to her. Only now was he beginning to wonder if the disk had anything to do with Liso's disappearance. Had she taken it with her into the jungle? What had been on it? Maybe if he could find it, it might help him in his search for her, provide a clue as to why she went missing in the first place.

And if - no, when - Liso *did* return, she'd be very impressed with his initiative if he found it and Bleize didn't. The more he thought about it, the more it seemed like the right thing to do.

The first place to start the search would be Liso's room, of course. He remembered that he'd had a duplicate of Liso's keycard made by one of the tech staff. He'd said he was planning a birthday party for her and the techie bloke had just winked at him and made him a dupe. He'd never used it of course - well, apart from that time he'd let himself in whilst Liso was out in the jungle. But he didn't like to think about that now: that had been when he'd been stupid and immature in his feelings for her. Now he knew it was serious.

He raced off to get the key.

There was a back entrance and it spoke volumes about how apathetic the base's staff were becoming that it was hardly any trouble to get in.

Careful to keep out of sight of the few base personnel they saw to-ing and fro-ing at the foot of the main ramp - still spraying herbicide, it seemed - they circled their way around the structure, looking for back doors. There were several small emergency doors, all of which were locked; but as they were about to give up and try the main entrance, they saw a young bloke finishing off a cigarette with a slightly guilty air.

'Come on!' Benny whispered from *the* bushes in which they crouched, and suddenly stood up and began striding towards *the* man. He jumped about a foot in the air, clearly not expecting anyone.

'Don't let Bleize catch you,' Benny said, heading straight for the door that he'd kept open with his foot.

'What? Er, um.'

Benny grinned.

'Don't worry - our little secret, eh?'

She tapped the side of her nose as he nervously ground the cigarette out in the undergrowth. Before he could say anything else, she winked at him and she and Liso slipped into the base.

Piotr felt a vague - but only vague - sense of guilt at having let himself into Liso's room. He imagined that she might be a little bit annoyed when she found out (if she found out) but nothing he wouldn't be able to smooth out. Once he explained that he'd been trying to find her, and that he thought she'd eventually come back here, he knew she'd be fine.

So he lay in the silent room, breathing in the damp, grubby smell of the pillow and trying to work out whether there was still any element of Liso's own smell in there. On Tollip's World, no one really had a smell - other than sweat and fustiness and old flannels - but if he closed his eyes and concentrated really hard, he could just about make out something that must have been Liso.

After a few minutes, he rolled over onto his back, and wondered whether, when Liso was back (and the more he thought about it, the more he knew, in his heart of hearts, that she would be) he'd be spending time with her, here in this room. She'd never let him in before - Piotr knew that was because she had standards, morals, and would probably have thought it inappropriate to let him in. He couldn't remember who it was she'd shared with - not that it mattered. He wondered whether Liso would ask him to move in with her: he knew a few of the other workers had shuffled around their room allocations so that lovers could be together. There were constant notices about it on the board in the mess area.

He wished, sometimes, that making friends came as easily to him as it seemed to other people - but when he started thinking like that, he reassured himself that those friendships weren't proper ones. They were based on sex or drinking or a desperate and unhealthy need to be liked. He'd always been pleased that he didn't suffer from any of those debilitating social needs: he chose his friends on the basis of their intellectual skills, their conversation. And very occasionally on the size and shapes of their arses. He'd discovered, through relentless research, a certain correlation between the contours of a woman's buttocks and her willingness to involve herself in conversation with him. He had no explanation for it, and was fairly sure that there probably wasn't a directly causal relationship. But statistics couldn't be argued with - particularly not when they worked his favour. Professor Summerfield, he'd been disappointed to note when he'd first seen her, was not one whose statistics indicated a likelihood of wanting to spend too much time with him. Still, that didn't matter: what mattered was what she could find out about Liso's disappearance. He felt slightly guilty that he hadn't been a hundred per cent honest with Benny about Liso. But he still wasn't

completely sure whether he could trust her. Of course, if neither of them was ever seen again, it'd all be pointless conjecture, wouldn't it?

Piotr stood up and mooched around the room a little, picking up bits and pieces - ornaments, a rather soggy rabbit discoloured with mildew, a couple of books whose pages had virtually disintegrated - and putting them down again. If Liso didn't return, he realised, this would soon be a horrid, mould-infested shrine to her. He shuddered.

He scanned the room: it all looked neat and tidy enough: if Bleize and her goons had gone over it, then they'd done a better job of replacing everything than he'd have expected. How likely was it that they hadn't searched the room? Not very. The impression he'd had from Bleize was that they'd searched Liso's room but hadn't found anything. Bleize had even asked him, outright, if Liso had given him anything to look after before she went. Obviously, he reasoned, Liso had been thinking of him when she'd made the decision not to give him the disk, if it even existed - it would only have made him a target.

He prowled around: if he was going to hide something like a data disk, where would he put it?

He dropped to his knees and checked under the bed; then he lifted the thin, manky mattress up and checked the underside of it, patting down the bedclothes. No. He put them back neatly - neater, actually, he thought, than they'd been before. Liso would be pleased. He continued his tour of the room, running his fingers over everything, knocking gently on the walls in the hope that there might be a secret panel or something - but they were seamless white plastic - well, grey-green, now. He checked the other bed - nothing there, either, and then moved to the built-in wardrobe, still full of her clothes. The smell of mildew was almost unbearable - whoever had sealed off the room hadn't bothered to leave the wardrobe door open to let at least a little bit of air get in. Liso'd be mad - these would all have to be thrown out.

He had a root around, though, distastefully pulling aside the few clothes hanging there, poking at the shoes that glowered, furrily, in the dark at the bottom. Trying not to stick his head into the wardrobe too far, he reached in and patted around tentatively, to see if she'd stuck it to the inside. Nope, nothing.

With a sigh, Piotr stepped back into the centre of the room: the only place left, assuming he hadn't already missed it, was the toilet cubicle. As with most of them, the door was open and had probably rarely - if ever - been closed. The air extraction was marginally better inside them, and most residents kept the door slid back so that the whole room would benefit from the meagre extra rationing of circulation.

A few toiletries perched miserably on the shelf next to the shower area. Piotr stuck his head into it and rattled the mouldering shower curtain in case Liso had stuck the disk to the back of it. Again, nothing.

He looked up at the circular ventilator in the ceiling above the shower -

could she have hidden it behind there? He reached up, his fingers just touching the moulded plastic. There were no screws - it was either moulded in or static-welded. Or perhaps it just clipped in. Piotr stood on tiptoes and gave it a push, but it failed to budge. He tried to grip the grille to pull it or give it a twist, but his fingers slipped off it. Probably not, then.

He turned to step out of the cubicle when a daft thought struck him. The door, as he'd earlier noted, was slid back against the inner wall of the shower: a rubbish bit of design for something like a shower cubicle - far too easy for water and damp to get down the gap between the door and the wall. He gripped the handle and tugged it. As he'd expected, it had seized up - rusted bearings or joints or something. Almost every shower door that he'd seen (three, including Liso's) and most of the ones he'd heard of suffered from the same design flaw. If you didn't open and close them regularly, they'd stick. Usually for good.

He gave it another pull, harder this time. Nothing. He carried on, tugging and jerking, more and more vigorously, more convinced each time that he was onto something. After two minutes, he was getting nowhere and gave it a hefty kick. There was a sharp crack - and Piotr looked down to see a split in the plastic panelling. For a moment, he felt guilty and a bit ashamed - he really wasn't taken to wanton acts of vandalism. It was a bit late for that, now, though: he gave it another kick, and the crack spread rapidly up the door. Another couple of kicks and the panelling was so damaged that he could pick it away from the framework with his fingers.

And there, lying amongst the fragments between the door and the walls, was a small, square plastic envelope. Greedily, he grabbed it and opened it up. Inside was a shiny, silver disk.

He'd found it.

'First we need to find Joseph', said Benny - and then remembered Janny. She checked her watch as they stood in the corridor, trying - unsuccessfully, Benny realised - not to look suspicious, and guessed that Janny would probably be in the refectory or playing poker or pool or cobbles or something. Still, it would only take seconds to nip in, grab her bag and be out. Quite what they were going to do next was anyone's guess.

'Which way's your room?'

Benny looked around, noting the corridor numbers stencilled on the walls.

'D20-this way.'

They passed mercifully few people as they made their way back to Benny's room, and those they did see seemed unaware that the two grimy-looking women were, quite probably, both wanted fugitives.

Janny wasn't in, Benny was relieved to discover, and within seconds she was back out with Joseph.

Liso wanted to see him, having been told so much about him on their trip

back to the base, but Benny wanted to be somewhere a bit safer before she flashed him around. Getting caught with a forbidden AI was only going to add to her problems.

'We could try my room,' Liso suggested. 'Although by now they might have moved someone else in - or recoded the lock.'

'Worth a try,' conceded Benny as she followed Liso down the corridor.

In less than a minute, they were outside Liso's room: she paused before touching the switch.

'Do we have any kind of a cover story?'

Benny just waved vaguely.

'I'm making it up as I go along,' she said blithely. 'Best way.'

Liso gave a shrug and opened the door.

Piotr dropped the disk and almost fell off the bed as the door hissed open - and in walked the last two people he evidently expected to see.

'Liso!' he gasped.

'Piotr!' Liso stared at him, and at the disk that he was scrabbling around on the floor for.

'What's going on?' demanded Benny suspiciously. There was something a bit creepy about finding him here in Liso's room on his own.

He jumped to his feet and attempted to give Liso a clumsy hug - Benny noticed that Liso looked less than comfortable about it, but didn't put up too much of a struggle.

'Long story,' she said, disentangling herself.

'Hi,' said Benny, giving Piotr a little wave: he almost hadn't noticed her at all. 'Like I said: what's going on?'

'Going on?' he replied awkwardly. 'Er, what d'you mean?'

'Oh, sorry,' Benny said with a big, apologetic smile. 'It's just that where I come from, people don't normally go poking around in other people's bedrooms. Just a funny little thing we have - it's called "privacy".'

'Ah,' he said.

Liso had plucked the disk from Piotr's sweaty fingers.

'What are you doing with this?'

'It gets better,' muttered Benny archly,

Piotr ignored her.

'Liso, where have you been? I've been...' He seemed to struggle for words. The best he could come up with was: 'Distraught.' Which Benny didn't think was very good at all, lovelorn or not.

'I bet you have,' Benny said accusingly. 'So distraught that you thought snooping around in Liso's room would ease your grief, eh? Helping yourself to Liso's property.' She indicated the disk and advanced on Piotr threateningly. 'You're a bit of a dark horse, aren't you, Piotr?'

'Eh? What d'you... look, I can explain.'

'That's probably the first honest thing you've said to me since I arrived here,' Benny glowered.

Piotr just stared at her: one more push, that's all she needed. One more. She'd worked it out - it all made sense. But she couldn't prove it without Piotr's confession. And she could see that he desperately needed to confess.

'Or shall we go and find Bleize and tell her that you squealed like the pig I saw a couple of hours ago?'

His mouth fell open - and then he sank back onto the bed, his head in his hands. Liso stared at Benny as if she'd gone mad.

'She *made* me do it,' he moaned. 'You know what Bleize is like. She *made* me.'

'Made you what?' asked Liso.

'You want to tell her, Piotr, or shall I?' said Benny.

He looked up at Liso with pathetic, puppy eyes. Benny was sure she could see tears beginning to form.

'The message I sent to Benny,' he sniffed. 'Bleize made me send it.'

Liso looked at Benny who just raised her eyebrows in a 'I *knew* there was something going on' sort of way. She sat down beside him and - quite against Benny's expectations, put her arm around his shoulder.

'Why?'

He rubbed his nose.

'She said that Benny would be able to find you. When you went missing, I went to her and asked what they were doing to look for you, and she said they couldn't spare the staff, that you could be anywhere. She said -' he broke off and swallowed, 'she said you were probably dead.'

'The cow,' muttered Liso. 'Go on.'

'And then she went all... all funny. One of those looks, you know, like something had suddenly occurred to her. She asked if I'd heard of you.' He looked up at Benny. 'I said no, but she said that you -' He was looking at Liso now - had just sent a message. They hadn't been able to intercept it, but they knew where it had gone. Bleize said that if you were such a good friend of Liso's that you might be willing to come and help look for her.'

Benny nodded, her eyes narrowed. This wasn't quite what she'd expected, but it wasn't far off.

'She set up the vidcam and gave me a script that I had to learn. She wanted me to get you to come, but she told me that - if you *did* come - I wasn't to let on that she had anything to do with it, otherwise you'd leave, or refuse to help find Liso.'

'But why?' Liso asked Benny. 'I mean, what's the point?'

'They found out about your message, like Piotr's finally admitted, but only when it was too late to stop it or intercept it. They didn't know what you might have told me about what was going on here. So they got Piotr - and what more unlikely person, which is what makes it all the cleverer - to send me another

message, getting me back here as quickly as they could, using you as the excuse. If your message had told me everything, then they'd have nothing to lose by trying to get me here, and maybe they reckoned I'd still be intrigued enough to take up Piotr's offer; and if your message hadn't told me everything, then what better place to have me occupied and out of the way than here, where they could keep an eye on me? And if they thought your disappearance was connected with something they'd discovered here, as Piotr thought - or at least told me he thought - who better to have here, investigating it, than the famous Professor Bernice Summerfield?' She nodded decisively. 'It fits!'

'Sounds plausible, I suppose,' agreed Liso a little dubiously. 'Even the famous Professor Bernice Summerfield bit!' She smiled.

'What gave me away?' Piotr asked Benny.

'Oh, you know - just the fact that you clearly had the money and the contacts to get your message to me just the day after Liso's, to organise a new identity for me, the posting here...'

The expression on his broken face stopped her in her tracks: she'd been about to stamp all over the remains of his ego some more by explaining that it was only after actually meeting him that she knew he wasn't capable of any of that. She'd already treated him like shit today: she wasn't about to flush the toilet on him as well.

'I did it for you,' Piotr said, his voice edging dangerously close to whining.

'I know,' Liso said, her arm still around his shoulder.

'Bleize said not to say in case Benny refused to help. I only did it for you.'

'I think we get the message,' Benny said. 'I don't suppose it was any worse than...' Oh Goddess, might as well *get this over* and done with. 'Any worse than me leaving you in the tunnels.'

He looked up at her, and for just a second she thought he was going to have a go at her. Not that she'd have blamed him.

'I shouldn't have done it,' Benny continued. 'But I thought it was my only chance to go off on my own, without Ogosto on my heels. Looking for anyone's easier without six and a half feet of muscle clinging to your ankles.'

Benny left it there, the implication that she'd taken the opportunity to look for Liso hanging in the air: if she'd been totally honest, she hadn't gone looking for Liso at all. But if Piotr wanted to think that she had, then who was she to correct him?

'Anyway, we need to get a message offworld.'

Piotr looked at her blankly.

'Can you help us?' interjected Benny, when it was clear he wasn't going to answer.

'What?'

'Get a message offworld.' Goddess! It was still like pulling teeth.

He shook his head.

'No offworld comms,' he said. 'There's a block.'

'We know there's a block - can you help us get around it?'

'I don't know about comms,' he protested. 'Why should I?'

Liso threw a glance at Benny and shrugged.

'Okay,' said Benny, unslinging her rucksack from her shoulder. 'Time to wheel out the big guns.'

Piotr recoiled visibly.

'Figure of speech,' said Benny, pulling Joseph from her bag.

'Ah,' smiled Liso. 'The admirable Joseph.'

'What is it?' said Piotr nervously, eyeing Joseph up as though he might explode at any moment.

'Our best bet of getting some help,' Benny said, slumping down onto the bed. 'Joseph?'

'Yes Bernice?'

'Is there still an embargo on offworld communications?'

'There is.'

'Any way round it?'

Joseph paused - more for effect, Benny reckoned, than because he needed to think.

'Not without hacking directly into the communications circuits.'

'And can you do that? From here?'

'No, I'm afraid I can't.'

'Bum.' Benny rubbed her chin. 'What about if we got you near a computer - would that do?'

'It would depend,' replied Joseph, 'on which computer.'

'You've worked in the command centre upstairs, Liso - any suggestions?'

Liso thought for a few moments.

'Most of the intersystem communication's handled from up there, so that'd be the best place to try. But I've no idea how we get in without being seen.'

'If I may interject,' said Joseph. 'I have been monitoring the onworld communications, passively, as best I can while you have been absent, and there are a number of things you may find interesting.'

'Interesting - or essential? We're in a bit of a rush here, Joseph.'

'Please supply criteria -'

'Oh don't start that!' Benny snapped. 'I know you've got to pretend to be stupid, but come on: you know the kinds of things that might be important.'

'I could hazard a guess, as you would say, but in the absence of information about -'

'Joseph! You're doing it again. Just make a guess at the top story, okay?'

He beeped in a truculent manner.

'Hugo Tollip has arrived.'

Benny's eyebrows rose.

'Has he really? The big man's come to get his fingers dirty! Any particular reason why?'

'I believe it may be connected with some discoveries made in a series of tunnels that were explored earlier today.'

'My tunnels, I think you'll find Joseph. With skeletons in them. What are people saying?'

'Much of the data I have gathered is purely hearsay, but the scientific staff here believe that the skeletons belonged to a race of upright rodent-type creatures, long extinct on this world.'

'Yes yes, we know that much. Anything else?'

'Two of the skeletons have been brought here for examination.'

'Okay, enough with the skeletons. What about Ogosto or Bleize? Anything about them?'

'Earlier this afternoon, a message was sent here from something called the Greenhouse about a security guard called Ogosto. You, I believe, in your guise as Anghela Maru, enquired as to whether he'd been seen there, and alerted them to -'

'Yes Joseph, I was there. Did they *find* him?'

'I don't know, Bernice. The base was notified of your presence in the Greenhouse, and Bleize and four security guards, Tanaka, Mitchell, Forster and Leighton, went to apprehend you. They have not been heard from since.'

'Really?' Benny's eyes widened.

'And the Greenhouse itself seems to have severed all communication with the main base.'

'Assapartemya, I'll bet,' said Benny, chewing her lip. 'I *knew* he'd be trouble. Didn't I say he'd be trouble?'

'You did,' agreed Liso.

'You've been to the Greenhouse?' whispered Piotr. 'Isn't that supposed to be top secret?'

'Not if the security's anything to go by,' Benny scoffed. 'Not a decent sentry robot or defensive laser in sight. Shoddy if you ask me; just plain shoddy.'

'What...' Piotr had lowered his voice to a whisper. 'What do they *do* in there?'

Benny looked around the room before leaning in close to him.

'If I tell you,' she said quietly. 'Then I'd probably have to kill you.'

'Fine, fine,' said Piotr hurriedly, raising his hands. 'Just asking, you know. Just asking.'

'What's that, anyway?' Benny indicated the disk that Liso was now holding.

'This,' she said with a wiggle of the eyebrows, 'is what this whole thing is about. All the stuff I downloaded from the terminal upstairs.'

'Really?' Benny's eyes were wide. 'The stuff that got me dragged into this whole bloody mess?'

'The very same.'

'Well what's on it?' she asked Piotr.

'I've only just found it,' he replied. Then he added: 'If we know what's on it,

won't they have to kill us?

'Quite probably,' Benny said. 'But I'm buggered if I'm coming all this way and not looking at it. Besides, if this is the key to it, we need to send the info offworld along with our message - Tollip and his cronies'd have less reason to kill us once the cat's out of the bag. And if we're going to get this place closed down, we're going to need some outside help.'

Piotr didn't look convinced. He looked at Liso, clearly hoping she'd side with his caution against Benny's enthusiasm.

'I'm with Benny,' Liso said without hesitation, and Piotr's shoulders slumped pathetically.

'Joseph,' said Benny, lifting the silvery sphere up in front of her face. 'Can you read this disk?'

'No, Bernice. It requires a disk reader.' He paused theatrically. 'I am not a disk drive.'

She narrowed her eyes at him. 'Are you being sarky?'

'Since my downgrade,' he replied sniffily - and not at all convincingly - 'I am no longer capable of sarcasm.'

'You're being sarky now, aren't you?'

'As I believe I just explained,' he began again, 'since my downgrade -'

'Okay, whatever,' Benny cut him off. 'We need a disk reader. I imagine you can download the information from that can't you? Or are you going to tell me that you're not a... a...'. She struggled to think of a way to end the sentence cleverly, realised that she couldn't, and gave up, stuffing him back into her rucksack as he began to reply. The muffled voice coming from her bag went on at great length, and Benny was actually quite pleased she couldn't hear what he was saying.

'The lab'll be the best place,' Liso suggested.

Piotr nodded gloomily.

'D'you want me to come with you?'

'Well it might look a bit odd if just us two turn up in your lab, you know. And besides...' Benny gave him a look as she slung the Joseph-bearing rucksack over her shoulder. 'If Bleize turns up and gets her hands on you, you might just need a bit of muscle behind you.'

Chapter 9

The base's corridors were, annoyingly, full of people as Liso, Piotr and Benny made their way to geology. The two women tried to keep their heads down, but they couldn't help but draw curious looks from those who'd known - or at least seen - Liso before her disappearance, and who were rather puzzled to see a woman that they'd assumed was dead wandering around the base. At least, thought Benny gratefully, Liso hadn't thrown away her vest when she'd been letting Morweningart enjoy her topless romps in the jungle.

A couple of people stopped them to ask where she'd been and to tell her that everyone had assumed she was dead. It was hard to brush them off, but she managed it as politely as she could, explaining that she'd got lost, that Benny had found her, and that now everything was back to normal. Fortunately, they didn't meet anyone who'd heard more than rumours, and Benny reckoned they'd done quite well not to attract too much attention.

'It's always the way, isn't it?' said Liso wryly as they reached the home straight to the planetary sciences lab. 'When you're around, no one wants to know - but the moment you go missing....' She rolled her eyes - and Benny caught sight of Piotr, his mouth half open.

'I -I missed you,' he stammered, blushing and turning away.

'I know,' Liso replied, with more gentleness than Benny felt she'd have been able to drum up. Liso put her hand on his arm and gave him a pat, which seemed to cheer him up no end. Benny only hoped that Liso wasn't storing trouble up for herself later.

The planetary sciences lab - covering geology, meteorology and astrometrics - was almost empty. One desk was occupied by an elderly gentleman in a cardigan, poring over a spreadsheet on his monitor. He turned briefly as they came in, nodded tersely to Piotr, and returned to his work as if Liso and Benny hadn't existed.

'Franc Puhlle,' Piotr explained in a whisper. 'Meteorology. A bit lacking in social skills.'

Pot, thought Benny drily, meet Kettle.

The walls of the room were decorated with charts and diagrams, cross-sections of the planet, long, ungainly trails of paper with wiggly squiggles on them. Even something that looked like a 3D star map that made Benny's eyes go funny when she stared at it. On a large table in the middle of the room was a pile of blue plastic boxes, full of rocks and cylindrical core samples. She picked up a shiny rock to discover that most of it was a fossil tooth from something very big. She felt a bit miffed: senior archaeologist here, and no one had shown her any fossils. Not, obviously, that she'd have known what to do with them. But it was the principle.

Piotr had slipped into his seat and powered up his terminal. Benny

wandered back to sneak a look at the keyboard as he typed in his password, but it seemed like gibberish. Or possibly Polish. Liso handed him the disk and he slipped it into the slot. They all leaned over Piotr's shoulders. Even though Benny knew that the disk contained stuff about the weapons facility out in the jungle, these had been the files that had dragged Benny across 180 light years, and she quite fancied having a proper look at them.

'I hope this is going to be worth it,' she said.

'That depends,' boomed a deep voice from behind her, making her jump, 'on what you consider worth a prison sentence.'

Behind them, looming over them like a bearded mountain, was a man. Actually, looming over them were three men - two guards and the bearded man, wearing a checked shirt and jeans, who looked like a lumberjack.

'Professor Summerfield, I assume,' he said coldly as he indicated to one of the flanking guards to take the disk.

'And who should I assume that you are?' Benny was fuming - just seconds from finding out what this was all about, and Grizzly Adams steps in to foil her.

'Never assume anything, Professor Summerfield - least of all that you can get the better of your employer. My name is Hugo Tollip, and that's my data you were just about to steal. We need to have a little chat, don't you think?'

And without another word, he turned and strode from the room, the two guards - one of them clutching the disk - prodding her, Liso and Piotr with their guns until they followed.

Hugo Tollip was a vast bear of a man - a mass of beard and moustache and whopping great arms. He could, thought Benny, have been one of the security guards, had it not been for the equally whopping belly on which those whopping arms rested, like sleeping dogs on a bean bag.

They were in his office on the second floor, sitting in a little arc in front of his desk. The two guards stood either side of the door, their guns cradled pointedly in their arms.

Tollip's face was broad and his eyes twinkled darkly. Benny hadn't expected this. She'd been prepared for sharp, hard-nosed efficiency; for cold, inhuman logic; or for ruthless business acumen, a thin grey man in a grey suit. Not a man who would have been more at home in a log cabin in the middle of nowhere, making best friends with the wild cats when he could, and strangling them with his bare hands when he couldn't.

'You,' he said, staring straight at Benny, 'have been a drain on my resources today.'

'Oh,' Benny replied sarcastically. 'I'm so sorry. If I'd realised that I was going to inconvenience you, I'd have stayed at home and not bothered finding out about your weapons research facility.'

Hugo's brow furrowed momentarily, as if he were surprised at her brittle

manner. Then he nodded thoughtfully.

'Your attitude is understandable,' he said. 'But may I remind you that you signed a contract when you came here - a contract enforceable by law.'

'Don't try to scare me!' snapped Benny. 'I may not be an expert in business law, but I think running a secret bio-weapons shop breaks one or two treaties and agreements. And besides, it was Anghela Maru that signed that, not me.'

He smiled, a big, big smile full of far too many teeth. 'So you want to add identity theft to your list of crimes, do you?'

Bad move, Benny. Bad move. But on second thoughts...

'I think you'll find that since you organised my arrival here -' She glanced at Piotr '- that you're technically guilty, then, of aiding and abetting the theft of your own data!' She hoiked her bosom up under her folded arms and tipped her head back acidly.

Tollip unfolded his own arms and rested his hands on the desk - almost a conciliatory gesture, Benny thought suspiciously.

'You've spent all day tramping through the jungle,' he said wearily. 'I'll have some coffee and sandwiches sent in - any preferences?'

Benny shrugged as though she didn't care - although she heard a sound from Piotr at her side that sounded suspiciously like 'Ham please!' - and Hugo called up his secretary and asked for an assortment. Benny, realising how long it was since she had last eaten, didn't argue - but kept her arms folded in a defiant display of body language.

Tollip pursed his lips. 'What happened to you out there? After Ogosto went AWOL?'

'Is it in my contract that I have to tell you?' Benny frowned and peered studiously at a spot in the air just a few inches above her head. 'Paragraph twelve, subsection fourteen: all staff must account for *every minute of their day* to Mr Tollip? Nope, didn't think so.'

His affable gaze became suddenly very much less affable as his voice hardened. 'Would you prefer to be allowed back to your room for the duration of your duty here?'

Benny just stared at him. He could lock her up. He would lock her up, she realised, if she carried on like this.

'Where's Bleize?' she asked, deciding to start on the offensive,

'Ahh,' he said thoughtfully. 'That's a question we've been asking ourselves too. She came after you Professor Summerfield, when you decided to run off.'

'I ran off, as you put it, after Ogosto. Remember him? One of your grunts who got hit by static? Ring any bells? Perhaps if you looked after your staff a little better, you wouldn't need people like me to do your work for you.'

'That doesn't explain why, first of all, you left Mr Volkov here alone; or why, subsequently, you refused to answer your radio. It doesn't explain why you lied to the staff at the Greenhouse and why, having poked around there, you tried to escape instead of waiting for base personnel to escort you back here.'

It doesn't explain why you sneaked back into this base and attempted to access that.' He jabbed a finger at Liso's disk on the table and threw her a sharp look.

Benny had to admit, it was a fairly exhaustive list of 'doesn't explains' - in Tollip's place, she'd probably be feeling as miffed as he was.

'Actually,' she said. 'The fact that out there in the jungle you have a biological weapons testing station should explain quite a lot of why I'm not explaining very much.' She paused, running back over the sentence in her head to make sure it meant what she'd wanted it to mean.

'I'm a businessman, Professor. This planet is a -' He cut himself off. 'This planet has potential in many ways, and I intend to exploit it.'

'Why do businesspeople always say that?' Benny asked bitterly. '"Exploit"? You exploit resources, you exploit people, you exploit planets.'

'What word would you prefer?'

'It's not the word I object to - it's the principle.'

Tollip shook his head.

'I haven't brought you here to discuss undergraduate economic philosophy.'

'Then what *have* you brought us here for? If you wanted the disk it's there - you have it! Why not just lock us up until you've finished *exploiting* the planet?'

Tollip nodded. 'I could have you locked up for the next month, that's true. Perhaps even longer - do you read the contracts you sign, Professor? - but that wouldn't help any of us. Bleize is missing, something's happened to the Greenhouse, and we still don't know where Ogosto is. And I think you three know more than you're admitting about at least some of those.'

Benny narrowed her eyes.

'So what are you offering us?'

'An exchange.'

'What? Information on your little shop of horrors out there in exchange for what we know about the Trees of Life?'

'The Trees of Life?'

Bugger! Well done, Summerfield! Keep on like this, and Tollip won't have to do any negotiating - you'll just spill all you know.

'The big trees,' she explained lamely. 'It seemed like a good name for them.'

Hugo raised a disbelieving eyebrow.

'Really, Professor. But... we'll come back to that. Very well... In the spirit of cooperation, I shall tell you something about the Trees of Life, as you call them. Our preliminary analyses of them show that they could well be the most incredible source of medicines and drugs ever discovered. They are a strange hybrid of plant and animal material - probably genetically engineered to be so.'

Benny tried hard not to let it show on her face that this wasn't as much of a surprise to her as Tollip probably imagined. She raised her eyebrows a bit,

let her mouth drop ever-so-slightly open. Looked just a tad amazed.

'And you're planning to harvest the trees, are you? Exploit their chemicals?'

Hugo spread his hands wide - and paused for a few moments as they were interrupted by the arrival of the coffee and sandwiches. Piotr and Liso ploughed in with obscene enthusiasm, and only the fact that if she didn't grab something now it'd all be gone in a minute made her join in the feeding frenzy. As the secretary left, Hugo continued to talk.

'It's... a possibility. Much of it might depend on the results of tests currently being conducted - and on what you can tell us about them.' Benny's mouth was too full of sandwich for her to protest ignorance, and Tollip went on: 'The current thinking is that the plants wiped out the animal life here, perhaps by creating the virus. Before I do anything with these trees - these Trees of Life, as you call them - I need to know that we aren't opening a Pandora's Box, if that's not mixing my mythologies too much. If the Trees of Life are dangerous, then that makes a difference as to how we approach them.'

'But not as to *whether* you approach them,' said Liso, swallowing her food.

'I've put a lot of money into this operation, Ms Fortuna - far more than I expected to when my probes discovered the planet. You've heard of cost/benefit analyses, I take it? I'm hoping for some return - but I'm not stupid enough to fly in the face of all warnings - all *believable* warnings.'

'You think I'd lie to you?' asked Benny.

'I think you might, yes.'

'Why?'

'Oh, many reasons: you might be concerned about what you consider *exploitation*; you might think that there's some danger involved, regardless of whether the trees were genuinely responsible for the virus. You might even have connections with rival companies or combines... I'm sure I don't need to sell you on the importance and profitability of this planet. If our discoveries are borne out. You might even believe that humanity already has enough longevity treatments available, and doesn't need a whole load more.'

'Perhaps they do,' she said around a mouth of egg and cheese.

'Is that really for us to decide?'

Benny pulled a scornful face.

'Oh come on! Don't give me that old "we're just scientists" crap - you've just told us you're a businessman, and if you believe that what you've found here could change humanity substantially and make you a tidy profit out of the bargain, you wouldn't hesitate to exploit it. I don't know what kinds of drugs you think you've found in the Trees, but if you're willing to spend all the money you say you've done, then they must be more than what we have already, mustn't they? You wouldn't be pouring cash into another cure for anal warts, now would you?'

Hugo grinned - a slightly wolfish but almost attractive grin.

'You'd be surprised at the market for cures for anal warts. But yes... there's

more here than just the usual medicaments.'

Benny was about to ask more when the communicator on his desk bleeped and he pulled an apologetic face.

'Hugo here,' he said, tapping a button.

'Sir,' came a man's voice. 'The team sent to the Greenhouse has returned.' 'And?'

'I think you should speak to the men yourself, sir.'

Tollip eyed his three guests and sighed.

'Give me two minutes,' he said into the communicator. 'Have them wait in the command centre.'

Tollip gestured to the guards flanking the door.

'Find our guests somewhere comfortable to wait for a while.' His attention returned to Benny, Liso and Piotr. 'My apologies for curtailing our chat-we'll resume it soon, believe me.'

The guards were surprisingly amenable to Liso's suggestion that the three of them be detained in her old room. Once the door had closed on them, Benny threw herself onto one of the beds, with undisguised disgust at the clamminess of the sheets and the fetid smell. Piotr balanced himself at the foot of the other one as Liso prowled around edgily.

'I wonder what that's about, then?' she said.

'The Greenhouse? Maybe one of their weapons has blown up in their face,' Benny grimaced, trying hard not to show any glee: having seen what the spores had done to the pig, despite what she felt about Tollip, she wouldn't wish that on anyone. Just the thought of it was starting to make her feel sick. Or maybe that was just the speed with which she'd stuffed her face with sandwiches. And not even particularly nice ones -

Something vibrated in her rucksack, and she suddenly remembered Joseph.

'Sorry about earlier,' she said, pulling him out and setting him on the shelf at the head of the bed.

'Apologies are unnecessary,' he twittered. 'I have been monitoring your conversations and I believe that I could be of assistance in determining the events that have transpired at the Greenhouse.'

Benny leaned forwards.

'How?'

'Whilst you were in the planetary sciences laboratory, I took the initiative of accessing data files relating to the base and the work here, including schematics of the building.'

'And here's me thinking you were just a very beautiful paperweight. How does that help?'

'I am unable to comment upon my own aesthetics as judged by human standards, but some of the military software you installed was designed for remote data access. I believe that I could use the ventilation ducts to locate Mr

Tollip and eavesdrop on his conversation with the team to which he referred.'

Benny got to her feet and dragged the room's only chair into the bathroom. There was a ventilator panel in the ceiling of the sleeping area, but she suspected that unless the builders of the base had been pervs there was less likelihood of there being spy cameras in the bathroom than there. Of course, anyone watching her drag the chair over to the shower would be wondering what she was doing - but at least they wouldn't see her pushing a silver ball into the ventilator tube.

The grille was surprisingly resistant to being removed, but by sticking Liso's toothbrush handle into the slots, she managed, with a grunt and a close call with falling on her arse, to get it off. She held Joseph up to it - the duct was easily wide enough to accommodate him.

'You know where you're going, then?'

'I do, Bernice.'

'Good man - try to keep a low profile, though: we want to keep you as hidden as possible, my lovely little secret weapon.'

'I object to the term weapon,' Joseph said sniffily.

'Happy with being called lovely, though. Go on - get in.'

Unceremoniously, Joseph was shoved up into the tube, and with a whirr, he rose into the darkness.

Chapter 10

Hugo Tollip wasn't sure what to do with Professor Summerfield and Liso Fortuna.

Bleize's idea of tricking the former into finding the latter had worked perfectly; and the fact that neither of them had mentioned Project *Evergreen* reassured him that, so far, all they knew about was the Greenhouse. Bleize's reasoning that if Summerfield *did* respond to Piotr's message then she probably didn't have much information to go on seemed to be bearing up well: there had been no messages from the authorities demanding to know what he was doing on the planet; there were no teams of enforcement officers appearing out of nowhere with warrants to search the base. There was nothing but a comforting silence from the universe.

But despite that, Hugo had the feeling that there were things that he wasn't being told. Summerfield and her associates had looked far too smug, far too knowing. They were keeping something back from him. Bringing her here to find out what Fortuna had told her was one thing; he hadn't anticipated that she'd actually be a source of trouble to him once he got her.

Hugo had - at the last count - another four worlds under development. He'd been on Magla, supervising the mining operations there when Bleize's message had come through: Summerfield had arrived, tunnels had been discovered, and one of the security guards had gone missing. Hardly a reason for him to up sticks and travel seventy-two light years. But this particular planet - he still hadn't decided whether to call it Tropicana or Floriana - was currently the jewel in his business crown. He was almost at the stage where he was ready for the kill, but recent developments were making him jittery. This was going to be the big one, but he had to handle it just right. He needed to know what Summerfield knew, and he needed to know where Bleize was. And maybe he was about to find out. Still, if the worst came to the worst, his 'insurance policies' were now in place.

'Right,' he said briskly as he entered the command centre. 'What's going on?'

The three security personnel he'd sent out to the Greenhouse after Bleize had failed to call back were standing near the door, their faces worried and bleak.

'The Greenhouse, sir,' said one of them. 'It's been attacked.'

'By whom?'

The guard shook his head disconsolately.

'When we got there, all the scientific staff were dead; some of the equipment was smashed up.'

'No clues? No sign of Bleize or her people?'

'Sorry sir.' The guard seemed genuinely upset, and Tollip remembered that

many of these people had worked together before - many under Bleize's command - on previous missions.

'I expect Barclay will want to give you a full debriefing. What?' Tollip broke off sharply as a woman - one of his technical staff - rushed into the room, gripping into the door frame.

'It's Ogosto, sir - and the other security staff. They're here. Downstairs.'

'What?' Tollip scanned the faces of the three security personnel, who looked as surprised as anyone. 'Is Bleize with them?'

'No sir, sorry sir.'

'Never mind - come on!' And Tollip was off, the plastic floor reverberating with his footsteps. He didn't bother with the lift, taking the stairs two at a time, down to the main corridor that led to the entrance gate area. He might have been large, but he was fit. He thundered on through, the others struggling to keep up with him, and down the broad slope into the main gate area - a high-ceilinged, wide hallway, dotted with stacked, grey drums of herbicide, hoversleds and bits of loading equipment.

At the centre of it all stood Ogosto, looking - as far as Tollip could tell - perfectly normal, if naked. At his side stood the three members of the team that Bleize had taken out to find him and a smaller man, one of the Greenhouse's scientific staff. They looked tired and weary, their shoulders drooping. At least they were dressed.

'Ogosto?' Tollip barked. 'What the hell happened out there? Where have you been? And why aren't you wearing any clothes, man?'

Ogosto tipped his chin back, almost defiantly. 'Hugo Tollip,' he said slowly. 'All this is yours, is it not?'

'All what? What are you talking about?'

'This... this plastic box. It's all yours.' The contempt in his voice was unmistakable and Tollip knew something was horribly, puzzlingly wrong. He felt the guards behind him shuffling impatiently.

'I don't know what you think you're doing, but drop your weapon and we'll talk about it,' he said, noting the gun in Ogosto's hand. It was a standard-issue pistol, and from this distance he couldn't see whether it was set to stun or kill.

'And if I don't?'

Hugo nodded to the security personnel, dotted around the chamber. As one, they raised their own guns.

'Drop the weapon, Ogosto, or they have orders to shoot.'

The three men that had returned with Ogosto looked confused. Slowly, they stepped away from him, clearly wary of being tarred with the same brush.

But still he didn't lower his weapon.

'One last chance,' Tollip boomed.

'For who?' Ogosto sneered. 'For me - or for you?'

He looked down at his weapon and gave a strange shrug before tossing it to

the ground. Then he looked up and smiled.

'Now,' he said, so quietly than Tollip almost missed it.

The next second, the three guards and the scientist with him raised their guns awkwardly and the air was filled with the soft thwack-thwack-thwack of trunk darts as every other armed guard in the room dropped to the floor, too surprised to even have aimed their own weapons.

'Now, Mr Hugo Tollip,' said Ogosto, slowly covering the distance to him. 'I have your base.' He smiled and his upper lip curled back.

The room was filled with lots and lots of awkward silence whilst they waited for Joseph to return. Benny kept stealing glances at Piotr and Liso, trying to work out whether this was one of those 'mismatched people thrown together in adversity falling in love' things. She hoped not. She quite liked Liso, but Piotr was just a little bit too spineless for her - and, she hoped, for Liso. But sometimes the most mismatched of people forged the best relationships. Didn't they?

'How are we going to get a message out?' Piotr asked eventually, rubbing his eyes. Benny winced, noting that his fingers had just been scratching at the fungus on his head. Ew.

'When Joseph comes back,' Benny said. 'We need to get out of here and up to the control room. The sooner we do, the sooner we can do something about all of this.'

'And that,' Liso said, staring at Benny and doing a passable impersonation of a pigeon with her head.

'What?'

Liso pulled a sour face and touched her own left ear.

Benny ran to the mirror in the bathroom and was nearly sick: a crusty, yellowish-green patch the size of a thumbnail had formed at the top of her ear where it joined her head. Tentatively, she scratched at it, managing to get most of it off. She washed her hands in the sink, trying not to look at them.

'I want to go home,' she declared firmly, returning to the bedroom. 'I really, really want to go home.'

'I'm afraid,' said Joseph abruptly, dropping from the ventilator shaft: and manoeuvring himself back onto the shelf, 'that that may be even harder than you had anticipated.'

'Why? What's happened?'

'The base,' he said quietly, as if giving a particularly uneventful weather forecast, 'is being invaded.'

'...I considered observing for longer,' Joseph completed his account of what had happened in the gate area, 'but I thought it was more important to report the events to you.'

'Nice one, Joseph,' Benny said tiredly, pushing - not running, it was too

lanky and damp and greasy for that - her fingers through her hair. 'Good job you got to the command centre in time, otherwise we'd have missed the whole lot.' She started to pace the tiny room. 'So either Assapartemya has convinced the men that Bleize took out with her that he's the good guy - maybe he's offered them a share in whatever it is he hopes to get out of this manoeuvre - or...' She paused. The second option was potentially much more disturbing. 'Or they've been sequestered like Ogosto was.'

'Sequestered?' queried Piotr, who started wringing his hands comically until Benny told him to stop.

'Taken over,' Liso said. 'Possessed.'

'By other hammies?'

Benny nodded dolefully. Whilst they'd been waiting for Joseph's return, once they'd convinced Piotr that they weren't going to beat him black and blue for helping to lure Benny here, they explained to him what Liso had discovered, and what Morweningart had told them. Throughout it all he simply sat there, looking like a child being told an amazing and particularly unbelievable story.

'But how did he do it? Did he use the static like he did with himself?'

'Not necessarily,' said Liso. 'When Morweningart borrowed my body, when I was out in the jungle, I had to make physical contact with the Tree of Life.'

'So these new possessees,' mused Benny, 'if there's such a word, could be other hammies, ones that are behind whatever Assapartemya's doing; or they could just be security guards that have been taken in - or bribed - by Assapartemya. Maybe that means they're open to persuasion away from the Dark Side.'

She looked around at the distinctly unimpressed faces. 'Well, it's something. Now, we have to get out of here and find a way to get a message offworld, let people know what's going on. Even if we lost the disk, there's still the few pages of it on my desk at the Collection.'

Joseph cleared his electronic throat, somewhat theatrically.

'What?' she almost snapped.

'You mentioned the disk.'

'Yes? And?'

'I have the relevant documents if you would -'

'You what?' Benny shrieked and almost dropped him. 'What d'you mean you have the relevant documents? When? How?'

'I was linking to the base's systems in the planetary sciences laboratory while you prepared to examine the disk. The unfortunate arrival of Mr Tollip curtailed your reading of the documents, but I was in close enough proximity to the terminal to download them into my memory.'

Benny just boggled at the little silver sphere and then tossed him up in the air before giving him a big, sloppy kiss. Well, as sloppy as you'd dare to give a miniature robot containing a newly upgraded microfusion generator.

'Joseph! If you were a man, I'd probably marry you!'

'If I were a man,' replied Joseph frostily, 'I wouldn't have been able to download the documents, and this conversation would not be occurring.'

She gave him a squeeze.

'And a romantic too! My dream guy! Now - how are you with escapology?'

The invasion of the base - his base - had proceeded with alarming speed. Tollip stood and watched, impotently, as Ogosto and his cohorts disarmed everyone with weapons, and proceeded to herd them into the storage rooms at either side of the entrance hall, before fusing the doors shut with their pistols.

One of the men had started to cry uncontrollably, and Ogosto growled and fired a trunk dart into him. He had to do the same to one of the remaining two women when she launched herself at him. The third, however, was less hysterical. Her name was Aline and she was one of the team whose duty it was to keep the outside of the base clear of vegetation by regular spraying with herbicide. She still had on her haz-suit, and her face was gleaming with sweat, her eyes shining bright with anger and fear.

'If you have to bully anyone,' Tollip called from the other side of the room where he was being guarded by one of Ogosto's men, 'then bully me - not her.'

'Bully?' Ogosto said, frowning, his voice still strangely throaty. 'I'm simply using superior strength to enforce my will. Like you do.'

'It's not the same and you know it - what d'you want here, anyway?'

'I've told you. I want this place.' Ogosto took in the whole of the chamber with barely disguised contempt. 'For what such a sterile place is worth.'

'Then why take it?'

'Because it is a seat of power,' Ogosto said. 'Your power - and now mine. I imagine that you consider us primitives - no technology, living in harmony with nature.' He smiled, although Tollip couldn't decode it (he was too busy working out what the hell Ogosto was on about). 'But all your technology allows you to do is to suppress and control the natural world, to bend it to your will. We achieve the same objectives by working with it, by cooperation.'

Hugo rolled his eyes. 'Spare me the green lecture. And you hope to do the same with me, do you?'

'If possible, yes; if not, then I will force you. If that fails, I will kill you.'

'And once you have this base, what then?' Hugo glanced towards the double doors behind him that led to the rest of the base. They'd been closed and locked - but, as yet, there had been no sound from the other side. Presumably no one thought there was anything strange about it. He turned back to Ogosto who smiled crookedly at him but didn't answer.

'And you lot!' Tollip called to the guards who had assisted in Ogosto's attempted coup as they finished their work. 'What's he offering you? You

realise this takeover will fail and you'll be in it so deep even a power-digger won't get you out.' He eyed up the three men, who were glowering at him, guns still in their hands. They didn't answer.

'Let's go to the control room, shall we?' Ogosto suggested, gesturing towards the doors. 'One of my men will stay here and look after the hostages.'

'I'm going nowhere,' Tollip said, folding his arms defensively, 'until you tell me what you want - and why.'

'Then we will start killing your people. These -' he held the gun up in front of him - 'are designed to tranquillise with darts and kill with energy. It is a second's work to change from one setting to the other.' He looked back at Aline, the last to be pushed into the storeroom, and returned his gaze to Hugo. 'Or I could just break their necks with my hands.' He held up a hand, signalling his comrade not to imprison Aline with the rest of them.

Tollip knew he was beaten - for now. Hoping that, just beyond the doors to the base, the rest of the security team were waiting, he strode towards them.

But the only people waiting were a couple of service technicians who'd been called when someone had discovered the doors - normally wide open - were locked. They were in the process of checking the locking mechanism when the heavy doors slid back with a rumble and a hiss of pneumatics and a grating of rusted bearings.

'Mr Tollip, sir!' one of them said in evident surprise. 'We didn't know you were in there. Someone reported the doors were locked and we -'

'It's okay,' said Hugo tightly, looking back to see that Ogosto had holstered his gun, but was following him with Aline, one hand firmly on her shoulder, a reminder. 'Just a temporary problem. Everything's all right now.'

The technicians nodded at him and started packing up their gear. Slowly, hoping that someone had worked out what was going on and was arranging an unpleasant reception for Ogosto, Hugo headed on into the base. Behind him, he heard the sound of trunk darts taking down the two technicians, and the heavy thump as they hit the floor.

'Looks like it might be time for the open blouse and the "Oh! Isn't it hot in here?" routine,' Benny said eventually when they'd discussed escape plans and realised that they didn't have any. Not proper, workable ones, at any rate.

'Couldn't Joseph go outside and distract the guard?' suggested Piotr. 'Lure him away?'

'The door would probably still be locked,' Benny pointed out.

'Doesn't it - he - have any weapons?' Liso ventured.

'Not so you'd notice - although he could probably give him a nasty bump on the head. How about it Joseph?'

'That is a possibility. However, Bernice, I suspect that such an impact would cause almost as much damage to me as it would to him. I am not designed to be used as a missile, it may disappoint you to know.'

'In the absence of any other plans, we might have to put that idea to the test,' she replied ruefully, scanning the room for the umpteenth time. It was just like all the others; and, like the others, there was - for anyone bigger than a football - only one way in or out.

'Let's give the old "Quick! He's having a heart attack!" routine a go,' Benny said eventually. 'And if he doesn't fall for that, Joseph old chum, I think it's up to you.'

'I think you'll find -' began Joseph before Benny shushed him.

'Piotr - lie on the bed. Yes, like that - now scrunch up your face, look like you're in pain.'

'Shall I help?' said Liso, a little bit too eagerly. Piotr suddenly looked a little bit too keen. 'I could slap your face or something,' she offered, and Piotr then looked a little bit less keen.

'No, Liso - don't think we'll need that level of attention to detail. Now start moaning - pretend you're having a heart attack. Good - a bit louder....'

She turned to the door and began thumping on it.

'Oh Goddess!' she cried out. 'Quickly! Quickly! I think he's having a heart attack - fetch a medic!'

Benny paused and listened.

'What happens when he opens the door?' whispered Liso suddenly, realising that if Benny had a plan for the second half of the operation, she hadn't shared it.

'That chair!' she hissed, pointing to the plastic chair in the corner of the room. 'Grab it and back into the loo with it held over your head - then whack him when he comes in to look at Piotr.'

She turned back to the door and began hammering again. There was a click from outside, and Benny stood back so's not to alarm the guard too much, and to allow him to get far enough into the room for Liso to clobber him.

'Get ready!' she whispered to Liso, and 'Keep moaning!' to Piotr, who continued his half-hearted theatrics.

The door slid back and Benny took another pace back, nodding to Liso who stood, the chair over her head, in the semi-darkness of the toilet cubicle. The guard stepped in, gun in hand.

'He's having a heart attack or something,' Benny said. 'Please help him, get a medic or something.'

The guard narrowed his eyes suspiciously but took a step forwards nonetheless so that he could see Piotr groaning and writhing on the bed.

One more step, thought Benny desperately. Just one *more*.

The guard motioned Benny back with his gun - and took exactly one more step. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the chair hurtling out of the darkness towards him, and he started to turn, raising his arm reflexively. It caught him, sending him staggering into the wall, knocking the gun from his hand. Benny swooped to grab it and danced back out of his range as he threw the chair off

and backed into the corridor, angrily.

'Nice one, Liso!' Benny congratulated her - only to be met with the sound of the door hissing shut and locking as the guard slapped the plate on the outside.

'Bollocks!' said Benny. 'Scuffling scuffling bollocks!'

Chapter 11

Tollip, Ogosto, Aline and one of the other security guards - a tall, Nordic-looking man whose name Tollip couldn't remember - reached the command centre on the third floor without a problem. The simple presence of the base's owner seemed to stun everyone he came into contact with into mute respect, as they simply nodded politely at him and went on their way. It was the perfect cover for Ogosto: no one doubted that if Hugo Tollip was there with one of the herbicide-sprayers and two security men then he had a perfect reason, not to mention a perfect right, to be there.

The command centre was quiet - three technicians drumming their heels, checking systems, logging damp- and mould-related equipment failures, monitoring for further static charges. In the absence of Bleize it seemed that any real activity had ground to a halt. The two men and one woman snapped to attention and started to look busy.

'Evening Mr Tollip,' they said, one after another, falling over themselves to cover up their slouchiness. He just nodded. In accordance with what Ogosto had told him as they'd ascended in the lift, he sent the three of them off-duty - no reason. He didn't need one. He could tell they were only too keen to go.

When Tollip and Aline and their captors were alone, Ogosto gestured Hugo into one corner of the room and roughly pushed Aline - who was clearly struggling to maintain a brave face - towards the other guard, who motioned her into a chair.

'I remember this place,' said Ogosto, casting his eyes around the room. A single bank of control consoles, complete with monitors, lined one wall. 'But his memories aren't detailed enough to tell me how to operate things. Or perhaps he never knew.' Ogosto faced Hugo. 'You have no idea how hard it is to really get a grip on these bodies, you know. And on your minds, your memories.'

'What are you talking about?' snapped Tollip, wondering if Ogosto had gone completely mad. He'd been the one who'd been hit by the static pulse in the tunnels. Frankly, Tollip thought, he was amazed that the man was still alive. Clearly the electricity had fried his brain. How normal was it to go wandering around naked like that? Didn't he know there were women around?

Ogosto curled back his upper lip and gave a throaty chuckle, tapping the side of his head.

'Ogosto's memories,' he said. 'Very useful. Your world is so much stranger than I could have imagined.' He wriggled his hunched shoulders around in circles, like he was in the middle of an exercise class. 'But your bodies are surprisingly agile and muscular.' He grinned again. 'I like them.'

'You're not well,' Tollip said, trying a different tack to the 'You're completely

mad' one that he'd been about to embark on.

Ogosto gave him a long, cold look.

'You haven't realised yet, have you?'

'Realised what?'

'Me - us -' Ogosto gestured to himself and the other security guard. 'You think we're still your employees: Ogosto and Mitchell - just a bit damaged in the head.'

Tollip said nothing.

'You found skeletons, didn't you?' Ogosto said suddenly, apropos of nothing.

Again, Tollip didn't answer: he was damned if he was going to tell them anything that they weren't already sure they knew.

'You found our skeletons.' Ogosto grinned again. 'We aren't dead at all, Mr Tollip. We're here,' and he tapped the side of his head again. 'We're still alive and we're here. And we have your base.'

'What have you promised them?' Tollip said, jerking his head at the other guard. Whatever game Ogosto was playing wasn't going to work: pretending that they were dead aliens and not just a bunch of scuffling losers out to grab a slice of the planet for themselves wasn't going to work. 'A share in your power? Money? Hadn't you better tell them that the only thing waiting for them at the end of this fiasco is prison - if they're lucky.'

'I didn't have to promise them anything,' he replied with a sneer. 'Their goals are the same as mine.'

'And what goals are they?'

Ogosto smiled coldly.

'Now that,' he said, 'would be telling.'

'Why didn't you shoot him?' Piotr shouted, jabbing a finger at the gun that Benny still held. 'Why didn't you shoot him?'

Benny didn't have an answer; red-faced and angry, she turned away from him before his accusatory shrieking made her shoot him. Liso was trying to be nice, but it was clear that she thought the same as Piotr. As the door had slid shut, she'd stepped from the gloom of the unlit toilet cubicle and stared at Benny and the gun.

'What happened?' she said simply.

'I - don't - know!' said Benny, her voice measured as she tried to bring her own anger under control. 'He backed out of the room before I even thought of it.' She gave a cry of frustration and flung the gun on the bed. Piotr flinched, as if it might go off accidentally and shoot him. Benny wished it had.

She sagged against the wall and faced the two of them - Piotr glowering at her from the bed, Liso standing in the corner where the chair had been.

'Sorry,' she said, scrubbing at her scalp with her fingers and then examining them to see if her skin had started sloughing off yet. She didn't

dare touch her ear again - it had started smarting. She felt dirty, stupid and dispirited. Their one chance to get out - blown.

'Ideas, anyone?' She fished out Joseph. 'Joseph? Anything?'

They just stared at her as if she was the mother duck and they were just the ducklings. Why did this always happen? Why did people always look to her to sort out their problems? Jason and Adrian were the same - grown men who always seemed to come running to her when it all went pear-shaped. For once, she thought, realising how close to tears she was, why couldn't she end up in a situation where someone else had the answers? She remembered a time when that used to be the case, but nowadays it seemed like it was always the great Professor Bernice Summerfield that had to wade in and save the day, come up with a great and cunning plan and pull a solution out of the fire... of whatever the hell it was. She felt her shoulders sag, like someone had let the air out of her, and her eyes started to prickle with tears.

Oh *Goddess* no, she could hear herself thinking. They're looking *at* you. They're just looking *at* you, losing it, like *a* big, wet, useless piece of-

Hang on, she thought. They're not looking at -

Benny whirled, realising that she hadn't even heard the door open. Standing in the doorway was a familiar figure, arms folded, looking at her expectantly. For the second time that day, it seemed that the Goddess had sent her the very last person she'd have expected as a saviour

'Don't just stand there!' the angel barked. 'We've got a situation.'

Luis Vittorino hadn't really known what complaining was until he was confined to the meteorology lab with all the base's scientific personnel - forty-two of them. The relentless grinding of so many competing egos in such a small space was threatening to drive him mad.

It had all happened so quickly: one minute he'd been beaver away, quite happily, at his terminal. And the next, he and everyone else had been herded out and along the corridor by two of Bleize's security goons, grunting their instructions like they had mouthfuls of marbles and throatfuls of gravel.

'Where are we going?' Franc Puhlle, the meteorologist, had demanded, playing the grouchy old man to perfection. Luis had expected at least some recognition of the man's age by the guards, but they were as rough and unwavering with him as they had been with the rest, pushing and jabbing with their guns as they'd forced them all out into the corridor. But the guards hadn't answered - hadn't needed to, Luis supposed, since they found out pretty quickly that their destination was the computing lab, three doors down. Inside, the comp boys and girls looked up in surprise - compounded when, moments later, the geology team were pushed unceremoniously in. Within ten minutes, every scientific team member that Luis could think of was jostling for space in the small met lab, with - he noticed - the notable exceptions of Piotr Volnikov and Liso Fortuna. And the newcomer Anghela

Maru.

'I'm going to speak to Bleize about this,' Franc grumbled. 'I'll have her sacked. Tollip won't stand for this, I bet.'

'Hugo will probably have sanctioned it,' Luis pointed out.

He got one of the met people - a young black lad called Angy - to log into the computer network to see if he could find anything out from there.

'Everything looks normal,' Angy said, scratching his head. 'What're we looking for?'

Luis didn't know.

'Something that makes sense of this... this...'

'Outrage!' Franc finished his sentence. 'This outrage! We are scientists!' he ranted, banging his fist on a desk and hushing all the muttering and whispering that had been going on around them. 'We will not be treated like this!'

Before anyone could stop him, he pushed his way through the crowd to the door and began to hammer on it, demanding to see Bleize or Tollip. People looked at Luis, as if he'd said something to provoke the old man. He turned to Angy, still seated at the terminal.

'Just look for something that might help - door controls, communications, something.'

Angy shook his head.

'Tried all that - the network's fine, but we don't have access to structural systems or comms. Never have done. I could try a bit of hacking, see what I can manage, but don't hold your breath.'

Luis patted him on the shoulder.

'Do your best,' he said. 'I've got a feeling that we might be here for a while.'

All across the base, the same thing happened over and over again: the two guards dragged people from their sleep or from the rec room or the mess and shoved them into smaller, more manageable collections. Surprisingly, there was little resistance: the kind of people that had signed on to work on a scientific research base just weren't expecting anything like this. One or two of the younger blokes - and more than one or two of the women - put up some spirited defence, but they were tranked to the ground quickly and efficiently, and their friends made to carry their bodies. The simple vision of people dropping to the ground, even though they were clearly just unconscious and not dead, was a sobering sight to most of them, who'd hardly seen a gun, never mind someone actually being shot with one.

Within half an hour, the coup was almost over.

'Bleize!' gawped Benny, almost unable to believe what she was seeing.

Suddenly, she felt herself being shoved aside, as Liso - and then Piotr - took the chance to push past her into the corridor before the expected door-closing

happened. As she scooped up her rucksack, Benny felt almost ashamed that she hadn't done the same.

But there was no need to worry: Bleize, for once, seemed to be on their side, although she raised her eyebrows slightly at Liso - but said nothing. Outside, the guard that Liso had whacked glowered at all three of them as they stepped into the brightness of the corridor. Benny pulled a slightly apologetic face at him and turned back to Bleize. She looked dirty and tired and wrapped around her knee was a blood-stained strip torn from her shirt. Smears of greeny-blue sap streaked her face and arms

'What the hell happened to you? We thought you were dead! Ogosto came back with the other guys you went out with - I assumed they'd been tricked by him.'

'They were taken over,' Bleize said grimly, and Benny could see how grubby and tired she looked.

'So what happened to you?'

Bleize didn't answer, looking up and down the corridor warily. 'Come on.'

Scanning for signs of Ogosto and his cohorts, Bleize led them all along the corridor in the direction of the central section. The place seemed eerily quiet, with no sound but the hum of the air conditioning and their own footsteps. Bleize took the lead with the still-glowering security guard bringing up the rear.

'What are they up to?' Benny whispered to Bleize as she urged them all back against the corridor wall and poked her head around the corner.

'Taking over the base.'

'Why?'

Bleize brought her finger up to her lips sharply, then beckoned them all after her as she sprinted across the intersection and into the corridor that led to the service and maintenance block, and then into a darkened storeroom. She palmed the lights on, closed the door behind them and dragged them all into a corner behind some high shelves stacked with plastic-wrapped paper towels and cans of processed food before returning to turn the lights off.

'So what happened?' Benny asked again in the darkness. She fished her torch out of her rucksack, switched it on and stood it on the floor. They looked like a load of schoolkids on a camping trip, telling ghost stories.

'I could ask you the same thing,' Bleize said with only a hint of archness, including Liso in her gaze.

'We came after you,' Bleize added with a sigh and, somewhat uncharacteristically, slumped, against the wall. There was little trace of animosity in her voice - which was a relief for Benny. Maybe Bleize was heading to the same place Benny was: The Don't Care, Won't Care Motel.

'When we got to the Greenhouse, Ogosto was in the root room, the one with the pit, and...' She gave a tired shrug. 'Some sort of energy wave or beam came from him. It missed me but it hit the other four guards. It did something

to them - took them over or something.' She said it as if expecting everyone to disbelieve her, and was clearly surprised when they just nodded.

'We know,' Benny said. 'They've been taken over by the hammies.' Bleize's eyes widened. 'There's a lot of stuff we know, believe you me. Go on - what happened next?'

Bleize told them how the energy beam had made her gun and radio malfunction, and how Ogosto and his cohorts had chased her into the jungle for almost an hour before she'd shaken them off. Fortunately, the fall that ended up with a branch impaled in the muscle just above her knee had come later, on her way back to the base.

'But... these "hammies"... The skeletons in the tunnels?'

Benny nodded. She wasn't sure whether she should be telling Bleize all of this - after all, she was Tollip's right-hand woman. But if they were to get out of this, she wasn't stupid enough to think they could do it without Bleize's help. She told her about Liso's discovery, about the Tree of Life, Morweningart and the hammies - and about Assapartemya and how he'd taken over Ogosto's body through the static pulse, and then, presumably, done the same with the root in the Greenhouse and the guards. Benny also filled her in on what Joseph had seen through the ventilation grille into the main hall - raising an eyebrow when Benny had to explain who and what Joseph was.

She just stared at Benny for a few moments and took a deep breath.

'Straightforward enough, then,' she said briskly. 'Ogosto's clearly the leader, the others must be other hammies who are backing him. Five of them - shouldn't be too difficult to take down.'

'They have guns,' Piotr reminded her.

'Which they seem unwilling to use to kill,' Bleize reminded him. 'I wonder why that is: Ogosto - Assapartemya - didn't have the same scruples about breaking the necks of the staff at the Greenhouse.'

'Whatever,' Benny said. 'We need to get a message offworld.' She remembered what she'd seen in the Greenhouse. She also remembered what Joseph had told her about having the documents from Liso's disk in his memory, but right now - with Bleize there - she didn't want to quiz him and let Bleize know how much he knew.

Bleize looked doubtful, and Benny could almost hear the gears grinding in her head: she probably still had too much at stake here to be letting the rest of the galaxy know what was going on until she felt she really had to.

'I need to know more about what's happening before I do that.'

'Well maybe you do,' Benny countered. 'But I've seen quite enough. Never mind what you and Tollip are doing out there in the jungle, Assapartemya has control of the base, Bleize. He could be planning to execute everyone.'

'Like Bleize says,' Liso pointed out. 'He's not killed us all yet, and he easily could have done. Maybe he's not the bad guy we're all making him out to be.'

Bleize fixed her with a stare.

'Tell that to the staff at the Greenhouse.'

'I'm not saying he's a *good* guy,' Liso protested spikily. 'Just that he might not be as bad as we're thinking. I mean, we have invaded his planet, haven't we?' She threw a glance at the door as they heard footsteps in the corridor. 'And set up a weapons-testing facility.'

This, Benny was pleased to note, shut Bleize up. It must be hard to argue convincingly when you're not so much occupying the moral low ground as you've dug yourself a very deep trench and are currently lying flat at the bottom of it. Face down.

The footsteps outside grew louder and abruptly stopped. Benny pressed her finger to her lips and they fell silent, ducking behind the shelves and boxes as the door slid open, and a silhouetted head popped in - and popped back out.

'Maybe he's going to hold us all hostage - or for ransom,' Piotr moaned quietly after the head had gone. 'He'll probably kill us one by one until his demands are met.'

'Oh stop it!' snapped Benny. 'We don't know that he has any demands.'

'Well he's hardly taking over the base and holding everyone hostage for fun, is he?'

It was the closest Benny had seen Piotr come to being angry, and she could tell that Liso, too, was a bit surprised.

'This Morweningart,' mused Bleize. 'Are we sure we can trust her?'

Liso nodded, but Benny pulled a cautious face.

'No disrespect,' Benny said gently, 'but I'd rather not trust any of them until we really have to. She seemed fine when I was, you know, in there with her. But we were hardly on level ground: I could have been duped by the pretty little woodland scene she showed me. And remember - she refused to force Assapartemya to come clean.'

'But that was when he'd done nothing more than possess Ogosto, wasn't it?'

Benny nodded. 'You mean that now he's killed people and taken over the base she might be more helpful?'

'Maybe.'

Bleize didn't look convinced. Benny didn't blame her.

'The only way to contact her is to go back there,' Liso said. 'And I don't fancy a tramp in the dark at this time of night.'

'There's always the hoversleds,' Benny suggested.

Bleize shook her head. 'In the dark they'd be as slow as walking. What about the scooter?'

'The what?'

'The scooter - it's a small helicopter used for reconnaissance. On the roof.'

'Can any of us fly it?' asked Liso doubtfully. 'In the dark?'

'Bzz bzz.'

'What was that?' said Bleize sharply, looking towards the door.

'...bzz bzz me,' said Joseph as Benny pulled him out of her rucksack.

'Bleize,' Benny introduced them, 'meet Joseph. Joseph - Bleize.'

'Ahh,' said Bleize without a trace of a smile. 'The forbidden AI. How is it going to help?'

'I am capable of understanding human speech,' said Joseph frostily. Bleize started at his voice.

'You were saying something, Joseph,' Benny said.

'You could use me,' he repeated. 'I believe I can interface with the scooter's navigation controls.'

'How?' demanded Bleize - and then raised a hand. 'No, don't bother telling me. It's harder to get angry about things you don't know, and believe me - I've got too much to be angry about already.'

Piotr piped up. 'Is all this really worth it? I mean why don't we just send the damned message and get ourselves rescued?'

Liso pulled a face at Bleize, the one who'd pooh-poohed the idea earlier.

'He does have a point,' Liso agreed.

'I've already said,' bristled Bleize, clearly getting narky at not having her word accepted, 'I don't think that's a wise move.'

'Yes,' pressed Liso. 'But why?'

'Couldn't be to do with your cache of bioweapons out there in the jungle, could it?' suggested Benny. 'Not scared that if you have to call in the marines that your little secret will be out?'

'Hugo has his own troops,' Bleize countered. 'That's not an issue.' Benny could hear the defensiveness in her voice: they were onto something.

'So there's something else, is there? Some other reason you don't want the burglar alarm flashing on this little planet of yours, letting all the neighbours know that you've got something worth stealing? I thought it was just a few nasty little devices of death...' Benny stared at Bleize in the upright from the torch, trying to figure her expression. But she was unreadable, her narrow lips clamped together, her eyes so hard they could have scratched glass. 'Of course,' Benny ploughed on, 'the fact that the planet can no longer be classified as "uninhabited" rather piddles on your bonfire, doesn't it? Correct me if I'm wrong, but once the authorities find out about the hammies, Hugo won't be able to own the planet any more - he'll lose all rights to it.'

Bleize just glared at her.

'If I may make a suggestion,' piped up Joseph.

'Yes?'

'I have examined the files I downloaded from the system earlier. Amongst them are a considerable number of scientific documents relating to -'

'We don't have time for this now,' Benny cut in. 'Sorry Joseph, but the science part can wait until later.'

Joseph buzzed sullenly and Benny watched Bleize's reaction.

'Professor Summerfield is right,' Bleize said after a moment. 'You need to

go back to the Tree, contact Morweningart. I need to stay here and free Hugo.

'Sounds good to me,' Benny said, rubbing her hands as if she actually relished the thought of ploughing back into the jungle.

'I'm coming with you,' Liso said.

'You're going back out there?' This was Piotr, the look on his face saying that going outside was the very last thing he wanted to do - unless Liso was going to go out there too. In which case, Benny realised wearily, he probably couldn't think of anything better to do.

Chapter 12

There was no one in the corridor, so they slipped out quietly and headed for the central section of the base and the stairs and lift that gave access to the roof. Benny still wasn't sure that she was doing the right thing by trekking back out into the jungle to have another word with Liso's hammy friend - but she desperately wanted to hear what Joseph had discovered - not to mention how he'd discovered it; and to do that, she didn't want Bleize to be in earshot.

The look in Bleize's eye, and her reaction when Joseph had been about to blab their secrets, was enough: there was something more to this than just a cure for baldness and some particularly unpleasant weapons. As they made their way through the deserted passages, Benny kept checking that Joseph was still in her rucksack: she fully expected Bleize to take him from her. Indeed, with the help of her tame security guard - who hadn't spoken a word since they'd left Liso's room - she might well have managed it, although Joseph could be pretty nippy when he wanted to be, as he'd just demonstrated. Benny kept sneaking glances at Bleize, wondering what was going on in her head: Benny thought that Bleize would assume that the moment they were out of earshot, Joseph would be spilling the beans. Which would mean - depending on what it was they found out - that it was even more imperative for Bleize that she rescued Tollip and got the base back under their control. Benny could live with that. For now, at least. Better the devil you know, she recalled from her researches into late twentieth-century Earth philosophy. Catchy tune, too.

'Lift or stairs?' whispered Benny as they reached the hallway.

'Neither,' replied Bleize, dragging them around the back of the stairwell to a small, round doorway like the hatch on a submarine. 'Accessway. Safer.'

'Um,' said Piotr, tugging at Benny's arm. She turned to see two of Assapartemya's newly converted goons standing at the other end of the corridor, drawing their weapons.

'Bollocks!' hissed Benny. It was too late to run back to the stairs, and by the time the lift came, they'd be dead meat. The accessway it was.

Bleize bundled Benny through first, followed by Liso and then Piotr as the guards started firing. Luckily they were still using the guns on stun, and the trunk darts didn't have the same range as the guns' energy pulses. She slapped a radio receiver into Benny's hand as she went through.

'You might need this,' she said. 'Don't lose it!'

Benny opened her mouth to point out that she hadn't actually ~~chosen~~ to lose the other one, but Bleize pushed her through the hatch.

'Faster!' hissed Bleize as the men began to run.

Benny was already inside the accessway - a metre-wide vertical tube with a ladder set into the wall - when she heard Bleize swear. She assumed for

a moment that she'd been hit, but moments later she looked down, past Liso and Piotr, and saw Bleize leaping through the hatch and pulling it shut behind her, slamming the locking bar down. Her tame guard-dog must have been hit - or he'd stayed behind to buy them some time. The perks of loyalty and a uniform, eh? Must get Jason one, she thought.

But she had no time to go down that particular Memory Lane when Liso and Piotr were fast coming up Back Passage. She got a move on, hand over weary hand, wondering how many floors up the roof was.

'This is the command level,' Bleize said from way below her, after about ten minutes of cramp-inducing climbing, looping her arm through the ladder and looking up at the three of them. 'I'm going to find Hugo.' She paused. 'Good luck.'

'Thanks,' called Benny as Bleize swung herself into the access hatchway. There was a rusty squeak and then a plasticky clunk as she closed the hatchway. Benny could hear Piotr complaining about the ache in his arms, and she wished he'd decided to stay in the base: but here was where the baddies were, and the jungle was where Liso was going, so she could hardly blame him.

Benny took a breath and heaved herself up the ladder: at least the airflow in the access tube made it feel a little cooler. And it'd be cooler still, she hoped, when they reached the roof. Behind her, Liso and Piotr followed, huffing and puffing.

'Not much further,' Benny said encouragingly - hoping that Assapartemya's men hadn't worked out where they were heading and weren't waiting for them when they got there.

The night air was surprisingly cool and fresh, although Benny suspected that was because they'd just heaved themselves up four levels of ladder and were sweating like very sweaty pigs. Piotr had to be helped out onto the roof, where he lay panting and gasping like a fish. Benny noticed how Liso - once she'd made sure he wasn't having a heart attack - paid more attention to him than she thought he deserved. She could see where this was going.

Above them, the velvet purple of the sky gaped in the ragged hole of trees - which, despite their height, seemed almost close enough to touch. One or two stars were visible, and moonlight from the planet's only natural satellite painted the edges of the tear silver.

'It's beautiful, isn't it?' Liso whispered from Piotr's side.

She could only nod.

'It's weird to think that this is only my second glimpse of sky since I've been here,' Benny said quietly.

'Let's hope it's not going to be our last, eh?'

The scooter, as Bleize had called it, was parked near the edge of the roof,

gleaming dully in the moonlight. It was shaped like a long, squashed egg balanced on three spindly, jointed legs. As they drew closer, Benny could see that the front top quarter was transparent - the cockpit - and a stumpy cylinder protruded from the apex.

'Is there going to be room for three people in there?' asked Piotr as Benny felt around for the door catch. She found it, pressed, and a segment of the hull hissed out at her and slid backwards.

'Plenty,' she said, peering inside.

There were two seats at the front, both of which were equipped with joystick controls, and a single seat behind them. Benny slipped into one of the front ones, making sure that Liso took up the co-pilot position: she had no illusions that Liso would be able to fly the thing if Joseph was wrong about being able to hook up to the navigation computer - heck, she didn't even think that she could do it. But she somehow felt more comfortable with Piotr behind her.

The door closed with a solid clunk and tiny lights began to flicker on the displays and instruments. 'Joseph?'

'Yes Bernice?'

She held him in her hand and waved him in the vague direction of the controls.

'Do your thing!'

'My "thing"?''

'Interface with the controls or whatever you need to do.'

There was an electronic beebble from the scooter's instruments and all sorts of new lights came on; below their feet, something hummed powerfully.

'Seatbelts on, boys and girls - this is going to be fun. Chocks away, Joseph!'

And as the droning sound from the scooter increased, Benny became aware of something flickering, almost subliminally, over her head through the glassy cockpit. She squinted, and realised that rotor blades had somehow sprouted from the stump on the roof, and were now spinning up to speed, each one catching the moonlight till they blurred into a shimmering, silvery disc above them.

Suddenly, the scooter gave a jolt as Joseph turned up the power. Liso turned her head sharply and caught sight of something on *the* roof behind them.

'They're here!' cried Liso.

And indeed they were - the two security guards had finally worked out where the fugitives were going (she wondered if they'd caught Bleize on the way) and were sprinting across the landing area towards them, brandishing their pistols.

'Joseph,' said Benny, her heart thumping, 'get us up now!'

The scooter gave another lurch and suddenly swung up and away, throwing its occupants around. Piotr was the only one to have fastened his seatbelt and Benny and Liso were slung against the inside of the vehicle.

There was a flash of ruby light and Benny saw a short, fine line from one of

the guns, incised in the crystal of the windscreen. It glinted like steel in the moonlight. Joseph had taken the scooter up about fifteen feet and they were heading for the edge.

'Take us down, Joseph, hard left!' Benny shouted. 'Follow the base around - we'll be a harder target if they have to keep running around the roof to keep us in sight!'

'And when we hit the ground?' said Piotr dryly from behind her.

'We won't get that far.'

A sickeningly vertiginous feeling hit them all as Joseph threw the scooter over the edge and let it fall before he began to level it off. Like a lead weight on a piece of string, the little craft swung around the side of the central complex, and both Liso and Piotr shrieked instinctively as they found themselves heading straight for one of the four outlying buildings. But Joseph knew what he was doing; and as another three or four fine pulses of energy flickered around them - two of them hitting the side of the building - he pulled the scooter up sharply and all three of them were squashed down into their seats.

And then they were over the building and dropping again, with Joseph using the structure they'd just passed over to help block them from the two men on the roof. With a sudden sideways slew, just twenty feet from the ground, the scooter zipped out and away from the base into the jungle, leaving behind the guards, their guns and, Benny felt, most of her internal organs.

I'll never have children again, she thought.

Once they'd passed safely out of what Joseph considered to be the range of the laser cutters, he slowed the little craft down so that they could get their bearings. It turned out that they'd headed off at over ninety degrees to the path they should have taken; so Joseph had to make a wide turn to get back on track without being seen. Not, Benny reflected, that it would make much difference: the only other working vehicles the guards had were the hoversleds, and it would take them forever to get downstairs to *the* main entrance and follow them in one of those.

'Right,' said Benny decisively as Joseph threaded the scooter masterfully between the trees, their trunks slipping by at frightening speed, strobing hypnotically in the vehicle's lights. 'Joseph - sorry I interrupted you back there - just didn't want Bleize to know what you knew, although from *the* look on her face she'd already got a pretty good idea. Tell us some stuff!'

'I downloaded more than eight terabytes of data, Bernice. Is there anything specific you would like to know?'

'Downloaded it from where?'

'From the disk that Liso made.'

'But Tollip took the disk off us,' she said. 'How d'you know all this?'

'Just before Mr Tollip apprehended us all, the disk was in the disk reader for long enough for me to read it.'

'What? You mean you *read* it?'

'I believe that's what I just said.'

'Why didn't you tell us?'

'I believe we have already covered that one, Bernice. I began to tell you back at the base but you silenced me to prevent Bleize from -'

'Okay, okay. I take your point. Is there anything you think we should know?'

'There are many things: for instance, the life sciences team have made some remarkable and potentially disturbing discoveries about the nature of the relationship between the plants and the animals on Tollip's World.'

Piotr nodded. 'Luis, one of the zoologists, said something like that yesterday. Something about horizontal transfer of DNA? I seem to recall he started on about "plasmids" and "homosexual Zygons", which doesn't sound right.'

'He may have been referring to homozygotes,' Joseph ventured. 'But it's the transfer of DNA that you might find more interesting-'

Benny held up a hand as the scooter dodged around a tree.

'Do I need to be sitting down for all this science stuff?' She looked down. 'Oh! I am. Off you go then, Joseph - but remember, I've not had much sleep recently, and I'm teetering on the edge.'

'In the course of evolution,' Joseph began, and Benny had the feeling that this was going to feel like much longer than it would actually take, 'the genomes of many species have actually been forged by viruses hitch-hiking a ride in them. Usually for their own purposes. Much of that genetic material no longer has what you might call "viral purposes": it doesn't reproduce independently of the organism. It doesn't cause disease. A lot of it actually just sits there doing nothing, but rather a lot of it now helps your bodies, your cells, perform new functions. In many cases, your genetic structure has kidnapped these viruses and now uses them for its own purposes. Many viral sequences code for immunities to diseases. There are millions of years of history of animals incorporating sequences of viral DNA - either from viruses or, in some cases, from other animals - into their own structures. It has long been accepted that many species of animals and plants - particularly bacteria - transfer genetic material between themselves horizontally through direct ingestion or through the medium of viral vectors, as opposed to vertical transmission through the normal mechanisms of reproduction and heredity.'

'They just fling it about willy-nilly, then.'

'Essentially,' Joseph replied, although Benny could hear a patronising edge in his voice. 'Transfer between *different* species, however, is much rarer, at least on Earth and most Earth-like worlds with carbon/DNA-based ecosystems, and is generally limited to bacteria and similar, simple organisms. Here, however, the scientists have uncovered a remarkable amount of DNA transfer between most plant species and - more interestingly - between your "hammies" and the plants. DNA fragments rescued from the skeletal remains

of the hammies have shown a high proportion of plant DNA; and, conversely samples from the plants - particularly from the ones you've named "the Tree of Life" contain surprising amounts of hammy DNA.'

'Which ties in with what Morweningart says,' Liso commented. 'The hammies and the Trees of Life are bound up together intimately. Remember that the Trees incubate the hammy eggs for a while before they're passed on to the female hammies.'

'I was not aware of that,' Joseph said, sounding ever-so-slightly miffed. 'But it would explain the intermingling. The fascinating aspect to this is the evident speed with which it was achieved. Would you like me to explain how the scientists determined -'

'I think you know the answer to that one, don't you Joseph?' said Benny 'Otherwise you wouldn't have paused to ask, now would you? And I do hope all this fascinating chat isn't taking your attention away from driving: I'd hate to be splattered all over the trunk of a tree.'

Joseph beeped. 'I am more than capable of multitasking, Bernice. Suffice to say, then, that the hammies and the Trees were modifying both their own and each other's genetic structures for several thousand years before the hammies died out. Since then, it seems, the Trees have been continuing to modify their own -'

'Can I, um, stop you there for a sec, Joseph,' interrupted Benny a little awkwardly. 'Should have told you this earlier, but we've found out that the Trees of Life accidentally killed off all the animals, including the hammies, with a virus.'

'Oh!' said Joseph - and then paused, clearly for dramatic effect. 'Is there anything else you haven't told me that might, conceivably, be of value?'

'Ooooh!' said Benny, just a little narked. 'Sor-ry! We have been rather busy today, Joseph, in case you hadn't noticed.'

'Since I spent the day in your room, it would have been impossible for me to notice, would it not?'

'Well, yes.' Benny pulled an apologetic face. 'And I'm very sorry, but.... Oh, just tell me where you're going with this DNA thing, will you?'

'What concerns me in particular is the fact that the initial data gathered by the scientists indicates that, should they wish, the Trees of Life are capable of producing viral DNA very quickly - DNA that can be transmitted to other species. Their elimination of other species is still an ability they possess.'

Benny saw Liso's mouth drop open; Piotr wasn't far behind her.

'You mean they could do it again?' gaped Benny. 'Wipe out all the animals - wipe out us?'

'I believe so,' Joseph said. 'If they so wished.'

Benny chewed absently at the back of her hand.

'And Assapartemya seems to have a strong rapport with the Trees,' she whispered. 'If he wants his planet back, if he wants us gone, there'd be almost

nothing we could do about it.'

'And the other thing,' Joseph blithely interrupted her doom-mongering, as if they were simply moving onto the next item on their agenda, 'is Project Evergreen.'

It took Benny a moment to realise that he'd changed subject.

'Project what?'

'Project Evergreen,' Joseph repeated. 'The files were on the disk along with the details of the bio-weapons. I would have mentioned them earlier, except that you insisted -'

'Yes yes yes, all right, I get the message Joseph. What's it about, then? What's the big secret? What's this Project Evergreen when it's at home?'

'As Mr Tollip's scientists have discovered, the Trees of Life are capable of manufacturing a wide range of drugs and chemicals. They have also discovered that a particular group of these chemicals act as highly effective telomerase analogues.'

There was a sudden silence, broken only by the gentle thwuck-thwuck-thwuck of the rotor blades.

'Uh?' said Benny.

'When most cells in most organisms reproduce, the tips of the chromosomes - called telomeres - become shorter. Effectively they are a clock, a way of ticking down the lifetime of an organism. Telomerase is an enzyme which helps repair the damage.'

'So this is - what? An anti-ageing treatment? A no-more-wrinkles skin cream?'

'I think what he is saying,' interrupted Piotr, 'is that he's found the Elixir of Life, the Fountain of Youth.'

'Immortality? Tollip's found the secret of immortality in the Trees?'

Benny tipped her head back, stared up at the roof and gave a throaty laugh.

'Is that all?'

Chapter 13

'Isn't it enough?' gaped Piotr. 'Eternal life! Immortality!'

'Yes, yes,' said Benny impatiently. 'I know what it means - but come on, people. How many times has some mad nutter come up with eternal life, eh? Or an alien artefact that promises to give immortality to all those who stick it in their ears or dance around it or rub it on their elbows?' Benny rolled her eyes. 'I mean, I hardly think I live a particularly adventurous life, but even I've come across it a time or two, so it can't be that rare, surely!'

She looked from Liso to Piotr, neither of whom could clearly understand her sanguineness.

'So if it's so common,' countered Liso, 'how come the galaxy isn't full of immortal humans? How come we haven't overpopulated every single planet?' She paused. 'How come we haven't heard of it?'

'Because it's always either a con, or it goes horribly wrong, or else there's a catch that results in sterility or boils or terminal stupidity or something. And when it goes tits up or turns out to be a little man sitting behind a curtain with a megaphone, people don't generally go on about it - not when they've been the ones conned.'

'So you're saying there's no way Hugo can have got it right?'

'I'm not going to go that far - not yet. Hugo may have what he thinks is an Elixir of Youth, but he shouldn't count his chickens just yet. Has he actually tested this elixir? On people -' Benny paused. 'Oh Goddess, I bet he has, hasn't he?' She looked to Piotr as if she expected him to be able to supply an answer.

'No idea - but come on, Benny: he wouldn't be this excited if he wasn't sure, would he?'

'He's a businessman, so no - I don't think he'd be that excited if it was just that. But even if the elixir - do we have to keep calling it that? - isn't all that he thinks it'll be, he'll probably still make a killing with the rest of the drugs.'

Piotr rubbed his head.

'So... what's the problem? I mean, yes, Big Business Is Bad etcetera etcetera. But, really... what's the problem?'

Benny eyed him narrowly.

'That's a really useful attitude to have Piotr, you know that? What I'm more worried about is what's going to happen when he takes a few tissue samples - or, worse, whole bits of tree - offworld and grows them. The Greenhouse had a whole load of plants growing in tubes. Maybe that's what they were for. Remember what Joseph's just told us about genetic transfer - well, I hope you do, 'cos most of it's already tumbled out the back of my head. What if the samples of baby Tree grow up to be mummy and daddy Trees and just happen to be murderous, psychopathic mummy and daddy Trees.'

Piotr just gaped at her. Liso stared out of the window into the flickering night.

'They wouldn't,' she said, only just audibly. 'They just wouldn't.'

'They did, Liso.'

'I know they did - I spent days inside their dream, and letting Morweningart share my body. But it was a mistake, they know that. They wouldn't do it again.'

'It's the Law of Mad Scientists, Liso: if a mistake can happen once, it will happen twice. And besides, we don't know how the Trees think. Morweningart told me that they think strangely. Slowly, but strangely.' She flinched as it looked like they were about to hit a tree, but Joseph steered the vehicle smoothly around it and on into the impenetrable blackness ahead. 'Worst case scenario, yeah? Tollip grows a new Tree of Life on some distant planet. Goddess knows, he probably owns enough of them. The Tree gets old enough, starts thinking, and works out - or finds out - what happened, how it got there. "Hmmm..." the Tree thinks. "Bad humans. Let's make them pay!" And the Tree sends out lots of its viruses. The Tree infects humans with Tree DNA, sitting there quietly. Humans come and go from the planet, spreading it far and wide. And the Tree's clever. Slow, granted, but clever. It doesn't infect everyone with a virus that will kick in instantly - from an effectiveness point of view, that doesn't make sense, does it?'

Piotr was deep in thought and took a couple of seconds to catch up.

'What? No, no - I suppose you're right. To maximise the spread of a disease you want something with a high transmission rate - highly infectious - but with a fairly long period before it becomes symptomatic so that it spreads as far as possible before anyone notices they've got a disease on the loose. If the period's too short, the population's alerted to its presence before it can be spread to enough people to guarantee a 100 per cent infection rate.'

'So a few weeks or months after infection, something nasty happens: people start dying. Or maybe the virus takes people over, or... or turns them into trees, or hammies. Whatever, it doesn't matter what the end result is: if the Tree wants to wipe out humanity, believe me - it will.'

'I must concur with Bernice,' piped up Joseph, making everyone jump. They turned their heads towards the control console where the little silver sphere sat, still piloting the scooter through the darkness. 'And I have been scanning other documents. As Bernice has concluded, the Greenhouse was set up not only as a biological weapons development centre, but also to test out the viability of growing tissue samples from the Trees of Life away from their native ecosystem.'

'And?'

'They were not entirely successful. The scientists have concurred that the Trees of Life have been here for thousands and thousands of years, growing perpetually, incorporating DNA and proteins from the hammies and from

other plants. They believe that tissue cultures grown from the Trees of Life will not exhibit the same characteristics as the originals, particularly without the physical presence of hammies.'

'And do they have a solution? Or is it all "thank you and goodnight" and we have nothing to worry about?'

'I'm afraid not, Bernice.'

'How did I know you were going to say that?'

'They are planning to remove an entire Tree.'

'What? Benny's jaw dropped. Joseph's revelations were coming thicker and faster than Jason racing for the bar before they called time. 'Dig up a whole Tree? It's hardly a rose bush!'

'I believe that in orbit is an empty tanker equipped with heavy construction traction fields. The mass of the Trees will pose little difficulty to such a vessel.'

Piotr swore in Polish - and Liso in a particularly vivid English.

'So there,' Benny said to Liso. 'Not only is he going to have potentially lethal and murderous Trees around - he's going to have one of the originals! The grand-daddy of them all. Maybe even the one that actually created the virus!'

Liso still couldn't swallow it.

'But there'll be precautions,' she protested. 'Quarantine. He'll grow the Trees in sealed domes or something. And what about the roots? They go for miles. He's not going to be able to uproot a Tree without crippling it.'

'Liso!' said Benny firmly, grabbing her hand. 'Can you hear yourself) You're defending him!'

'No, no, I'm not. I'm... I'm defending the hammies, the Trees. They wouldn't.'

She looked into Benny's eyes, and Benny could see her uncertainty. She desperately wanted to believe that such a thing couldn't be.

'Mistakes happen, Liso. Quarantines get breached. Haz-suits get holes in them. People try to steal samples. Idiots press the wrong buttons. If it can happen, it will. And I bet he's got some clever way around the roots - hydroponics or something. Look, if it was just a chemical bubbling up from a hole in the ground then I'd pack up my bags and go home now and he could have his elixir. But it's not. And I'm damned if I'm going to let him take Trees off this planet to threaten the whole of humanity - never mind what's going to happen to the hammies stored in it.'

'Bernice,' said Joseph. 'My apologies for the interruption, but we have arrived at the Tree.'

Ahead of them, only dimly visible as a vast column of black against the even blacker blackness of the jungle behind it, was the Tree of Life. Joseph pulled the scooter up and the engine noise began to dip as he prepared it for landing.

Suddenly there was a sharp noise, a mixture of a crunch and a crash, and a hand-sized patch of the curved windscreen of the scooter frosted over, a ragged hole at its centre.

'A directed energy weapon has been fired at the vehicle,' said Joseph drily, swinging the scooter up and banking sharply to the right. Its occupants were thrown against their seatbelts violently.

'Someone's shooting at us!' wailed Piotr.

'Who?' said Liso, trying to see out of the scooter.

'Sensors indicate a human figure at the base of the Tree,' Joseph informed them as they followed the curve of the Tree around.

'Bugger!' swore Benny. 'It'll be one of Assapartemya's goons. How did he get here before us? Bleize said that using the hoversleds would take as long as walking.'

'Perhaps,' suggested Joseph, 'he set out before us.'

'So he's not come here to stop us?'

'Possibly not. What are your instructions?'

Benny thought frantically. Despite the size of the Tree, there was no point in setting down anywhere near it: they'd come all this way to talk to Morweningart, and whoever was down there would find them pretty quickly once they started their conversation. And he was armed; they weren't.

'This is a pain,' Benny muttered. 'How are we going to...'

She slapped her hands together.

'Joseph! Turn us round!'

'Where are we going?' asked Liso.

'Back to the base?' whined Piotr.

'Nope,' Benny said with a grin. 'We came to talk to Morweningart, and we're *going* to talk to Morweningart!'

The trip took no time at all. Joseph set the scooter down with surprising gentleness just thirty yards from the Greenhouse. Benny got him to switch some lights on so that they could see what they were doing, and with a sharp hiss, the door cracked open. The jungle air, heavy and moist and cooler than they'd been expecting, flooded in.

Liso jumped down, her feet crashing thunderously in the silence, and Benny followed, leaving Piotr to clamber out like an ungainly chick from an egg.

The Greenhouse obviously still had power - the lights were dim but on - and it only took them a few moments to reach the main door.

'Grab a stick or something,' Benny advised them. 'For all we know, there's another of Assapartemya's people here, too.'

'Now you tell us,' Piotr grumped, but took the small, broken branch that Liso found for him. He looked less than comfortable hefting it in his hands, thought Benny worriedly, but at least he was making the effort.

'So you think we'll be able to contact Morweningart through the root, do you?' Benny checked with Liso.

'Don't see why not - the Trees of Life have incredible root systems, running halfway around the planet. That was how Assapartemya managed to fire that

energy wave at Bleize and her men: he must have somehow been able to channel one of the static pulses through Ogosto's body, which shows that the roots are as good a way of contacting the Trees as anything.'

Cautiously, they entered the silent structure, and made their way past the offices, the room with all the little plant samples in their tubes and the room with the glass cases in. Benny deliberately didn't look: she didn't want to see what had become of the spore-infected pig after all these hours. The root room, fortunately, was empty. Equipment bleeped and pinged, subdued, around them, as if waiting for something to bring it all to life. The root still lay draped across the trolleys, its surface looking darker and more dried out than it had done that morning. The air conditioning couldn't have been good for it.

'How do we contact Morweningart?' Benny asked as she and Liso stepped down into the pit; she held out her hand to the root - but not quite touching it.

'Shall I do the honours?' asked Liso, and Benny could hear the restrained excitement in her voice.

'Be my guest,' said Benny, not sure whether it was just her fear of possibly surrendering her body to Morweningart that made her pull back. Liso took a breath and placed her hands flat against the crinkly surface of the root, moving them in slow ellipses up and down. Benny thought it looked strangely erotic - and she remembered what Morweningart had told her about how the male hammies 'fertilised' the eggs held in the Trees.

'I can feel her,' Liso said dreamily. 'She can hear me... she's coming. Just a -'

Liso went rigid and her eyes glazed over. Yet she didn't fall. It was as if she'd been paralysed.

Then, slowly, she pulled her hands away from the root and, hunching over slightly, turned to face Benny, directing a brief glance at Piotr, still on the floor of the lab a foot above them.

'Hello again,' she said, doing that lip-curling thing. 'Thank you for bringing Liso back to me.'

'A pleasure,' Benny said uncertainly. She still hadn't worked out whether she completely trusted Morweningart - or any of the hammies. Assapartemya was definitely not going to be added to her Christmas card list any time soon; and, considering that the hammies had collaborated with the Trees to wipe out virtually every single animal on the planet, Morweningart was far from winning her over just yet.

'Liso's told me much of what has happened since she left us,' Liso - Morweningart - said. 'Assapartemya has caused a great deal of trouble for you, and harm to you.'

'I think he intends to cause much more if he can. Maybe now you'll see why we were so concerned.'

'I understand perfectly, but if you have come to ask me to force him into something against his will again, I'm afraid you'll fail.'

'We came here to find a way to stop him,' Benny said through gritted teeth, determined not to get into a slanging match with Morweningart, no matter how much she felt that it would make her feel better. 'He's locked everyone

'I know,' Morweningart interrupted gently.

'Then you'll also know that it's not only us humans that need protecting from Assapartemya: you and the Trees of Life need protecting from Hugo: Tollip.'

'Then by any logical reasoning, we should lend our assistance to Assapartemya, should we not?'

'Only if you think that once he's got rid of us humans he'll be your best pal, yes. But you don't believe that any more than I do, do you?' Benny paused, but Morweningart said nothing. 'Assapartemya has been scheming away inside your "dream" for millennia: who knows what he's planning? And as for Tollip - I'd consider him as much my enemy as yours.'

'The man who plans to use the Trees of Life for his own profit?' Morweningart's otherwise gentle voice sounded almost scornful. 'Don't worry about him, Benny - his plans will not harm us.'

'Oh won't they indeed? I don't think you've plucked the full story from Liso's memory: what you don't know is that he's planning to take one of the Trees away from here - to grow it somewhere where he'll have control over it.'

'Away from here?' There was a chill in Morweningart's voice.

'It's safer for him - he can have it in what he thinks are nicely controlled conditions. Somewhere he can get the Tree to produce whatever life-enhancing chemicals he can sell, never mind this immortality drug that he thinks he's found.'

'But what about the dreamers? What about my people?'

'I don't suppose you'll have to worry about them,' Benny said, realising that she was doing her best to manipulate Morweningart, and felt just a little bit dirty - although, as she spoke, the words sounded ail-too convincing. 'I bet he has his scientists working on a way to make the Tree "safe".'

'Safe?'

'If he's worried that *the* Tree minds or whatever you call them will interfere with his grubby little money-making schemes he'll find a way to have them lobotomised, suppressed. He won't want to risk a repeat of what Assapartemya's done, will he?'

'But that-' Morweningart faltered, and Benny saw Liso wobble and reached out for the root to steady herself.

'Exactly - that will mean the deaths of however-many-thousands of you are dreaming in the Tree that he takes.'

'He would do that?' Morweningart's voice had dribbled to an awe-struck whisper.

'Believe it. Assapartemya's hardly a beaming poster-child for your lot, is he? He's not really endeared the hammies to Tollip.' She stopped, realising that she was piling it on a bit thick: regardless of whether Morweningart thought the hammies had any obligation to help her against Assapartemya, playing the 'death of your race' card was a little below the belt.

'Can you stop him?'

'I don't know,' Benny replied honestly. 'At the moment, Assapartemya actually seems to be doing a fairly good job of that himself. And, maybe, if all he's after is to get us all to leave... who knows? He might have succeeded in scaring Hugo and his lot off.'

'Still doesn't explain why he was locking everyone up, though,' Piotr interjected.

'He has a point,' agreed Benny.

'But by your reasoning, if this Hugo Tollip is as dangerous to us as you say,' repeated Morweningart, 'we should be assisting Assapartemya, not you.'

'And exchange one unknown threat for another? Have Assapartemya in control instead of Tollip?' Benny weighed up the two threats. 'You know, Morweningart, you could be right. If I were in your shoes, I'd probably be thinking the same. But wouldn't it be better if we could work together and get rid of both threats? If you don't trust me, then ask Liso: you know her better than you know any other human. And she knows you better than she knows any other hammy.' She threw her hands in the air again. 'We're all in the shit here, when you think about it: hammies, humans - us. There has to be a way to get this mess back on the right tracks, if that's not mixing too many metaphors.'

Benny looked down at the root, bursting from the soil, and wondered just how many hammy souls were in the Tree to which it belonged, dreaming away, unaware of the threat to their existence. Did this root belong to the very Tree that Tollip was planning to steal? What would happen if its connections with the others were severed? And if Tollip managed to kill the Tree's brain and the hammies along with it... would they experience any pain? Would they just wink out, like tiny, unfeeling lights?

Benny suddenly realised that, in this particular fight, she might be forced to take sides: Hugo wanted to exploit the hammies and their Trees of Life; Assapartemya wanted *the* humans off the planet, but seemed willing to use violence to achieve his ends.

If it came down to it, who would she back?

Chapter 14

Bleize regretted leaving Edwards behind, but Assapartemya's men had shot him - with a trunk dart, thankfully - and there was little she could do other than to avoid the same fate.

She wasn't sure that allowing Summerfield and the others to leave the base had been a good idea - not knowing what that AI of hers had stored inside it. But since they'd needed it to fly the scooter, there wasn't much she could have done. Despite not having the AI in her hands, she felt safer with Summerfield and her friends away from the base - for now.

As she sealed the access hatch behind her, hoping that the security men downstairs were dim enough to waste precious time in trying to follow her up, she consoled herself with the thought that if she could free Hugo and they could retake the base, whatever Summerfield and her AI knew would be academic. If Summerfield had somehow been able to send a message offworld by now, she'd have done so. Bleize felt confident that the only people who knew about the weapons - and about Project *Evergreen* - were still on the planet.

Bleize dipped her head around the corner and checked that the corridor was empty. The base felt so strange with everyone locked up. She'd patrolled the corridors at night many times, but she'd always bumped into a few people - either on their way back to their rooms, on late duty, or scurrying furtively between each other's quarters. She had no time for romances on the base herself, but she wasn't prudish enough to deny those who *did* have a penchant for them their fun.

Bleize knew that she worked better around people, with people. She disliked her own company - perhaps that was why she'd joined the army at such a young age, to be in the company of others, people like herself who wanted to get out and do things, see places. The product of a distant mother and an over-enthusiastic father, or so numerous psych evaluations had told her.

But the base now was simply eerie. She'd been tempted to spend some time releasing the locked-up personnel; but she wasn't sure whether they'd be of any use other than as a diversion; and it was quite possible that it would simply get some of them killed. If any of them had the initiative to extricate themselves - and it seemed that none of them did - then they'd probably be sharp enough to survive. But she wasn't about to release a load of panicky scientists into the wild. For now, they - and she - were safer where they were.

There was a sudden dip in the light levels as they switched over to night.

Checking the corridor again, she crossed it quickly and hugged herself up against the wall, listening out for any signs of the guards. Although it seemed that only Assapartemya and the four others had been possessed, she didn't know enough about the mechanism of it to be sure that he hadn't been able to

co-opt any others since his arrival. She suspected not, otherwise she'd surely have seen them.

Moving as quietly as she could, Bleize pressed herself against the door beyond which she hoped Hugo, Assapartemya and the other guard were still waiting. She could feel her heart thumping: she had no idea of where in the room they were, whether Assapartemya had a gun to Hugo's head or not. She was unarmed, with only the element of surprise on her side. Not a very comforting thought, even to a soldier trained in a hundred and one ways of killing barehanded.

Steeling herself, ready to spring, Bleize slapped the doorplate.

'You're mad,' said Hugo.

'I am also armed and in control of this place,' Assapartemya reminded him. 'And I am quite capable of killing her.' He gestured at Aline, who gave a whimper and backed further into the corner, shaking her head and imploring Hugo with her eyes not to do anything stupid. The other security guard stared grimly at her.

'You wanted us to leave your planet? Fine - we'll go.'

Assapartemya shook his head slowly.

'That was before,' he said. 'Plans change. That's why I want you to send the message.'

'But why? Why d'you want me to bring more people here? That would just make it more dangerous for you.'

'You already know why, Hugo.' He took a step forwards and tapped the side of his head. 'The other mind in here, Ogosto: he has shown me many things, many worlds. We knew of the stars, but we had no idea that around them circled other worlds; and that on those other worlds were other beings - beings like us, like you.' He gestured at Hugo with his gun. 'So many worlds... so many people. It makes me feel dizzy to think about them. Maybe you can comprehend their numbers, but to me...' He gestured vaguely with the gun again. 'It is beyond my understanding.'

'So why not let us leave, then? Leave you to your world, your people.'

'Because you would be back. I know.' He tapped his head again. 'Ogosto tells me about you and your people. You would be back with more people, bigger weapons. You would not just leave. We both know that. You have no respect for other species.'

Hugo frowned.

'What d'you mean?'

Ogosto waved his hand vaguely.

'The galaxy is full of other species, other races - and you have chosen to staff this place solely with humans. You are not a great - fan? Is that the word? - of non-humans, are you? Of aliens?'

'My political views have no bearing on this.'

'I think they do, Hugo. I think they do: you consider us - my people, the Trees of Life, my world - as exploitable and expendable because we are not like you. You hate anything different, anything you do not understand - anything you cannot control.'

'I control everything here,' Hugo said, trying to hold down his anger. How *dare* this thing - this thing that had stolen a human body - talk to him like this? It only confirmed his long-held belief that non-humans would never be able to work comfortably alongside humans. They lacked a due respect for what humans had achieved in the galaxy. Their ways of thinking, their mind-set was too different.

'So you continue to believe - and, I imagine, you'll continue to believe it right up until the end.'

'I refuse to have this conversation,' Hugo said. 'And you haven't answered my question - why bring-'

And then the door hissed open and a figure cannoned into the room, tumbling across the floor in a perfectly executed roll. Before Hugo could react, the blurred figure was up on its feet, smashing into Ogosto with a well-timed uppercut. The disparity in their sizes was almost comical - like a Chihuahua downing a Great Dane. Ogosto's head snapped back and he smacked heavily against the wall before he slid to the floor, legs splayed.

The other guard, the one in the corner with Aline, raised his own gun to fire, but Bleize was still moving and had already sprinted behind *the* control desks. Hugo weighed up the situation: could he reach the guard whilst he was occupied with Bleize? The man was a good fifteen feet from him - he'd never make it: at the first sign of movement from him (and he knew he wasn't light on his feet by any stretch of the imagination) the guard would turn and shoot him.

The guard, however, had another weapon: Aline. He reached back and grabbed her by the wrist, jerking her around in front of him, and wrapped his heavy forearm around her throat. Aline struggled frantically, slapping at the guard as he began to choke her.

'Come out now,' said *the* guard, his voice strained as if he were struggling to use the guard's vocal chords. 'Or I kill her.'

Hugo could see Bleize's shoulder and her foot from where he stood. She didn't move for a moment - and then, slowly, she stood up, her hands raised, her face a grimy mask of anger and resignation.

She threw Hugo an apologetic look. The guard moved around, gesturing for Bleize to join Hugo.

'Sorry,' she said, and Hugo realised how much her failure must have hurt her: Bleize wasn't a woman used to it, particularly from herself. Her standards were high - that was why Hugo had hired her all those years ago, and why he continued to rely on her.

'One down, though,' she said defiantly, tilting her chin at the guard as she

looked pointedly at Ogosto. He loosened his grip on Aline, but didn't let her go.

'It doesn't matter,' the guard said.

'Only five of you to keep control of eighty people?' Bleize tried to sound positive, but Hugo wasn't fooled. 'How long d'you think you can keep us down?'

'Long enough,' the guard smiled back darkly.

'What's your name, anyway - your *real* name? I know you're not Mitchell.'

The guard grinned broadly.

'We've already met,' he said. 'My name's Assapartemya.'

'So,' said Benny. 'Are you with us or not?'

'In principle, yes,' Morweningart said. 'How can we help you?'

'I'm not sure - if you won't force Assapartemya to tell you his plans, I don't really know what you can do to help. But if I think of anything, I'll let you know. Is there any way to get him out of Ogosto's body? That would be a start.'

'This situation has never occurred before.'

'Great,' sighed Benny. 'So we're all on a learning curve. Any ideas how he did the energy blast thing?'

'Again, this is something new to us: there is obviously a synergy between our minds and your bodies that allows a combination of the two to redirect the energy in the static pulses. That's all I can think of.'

'And if we *do* find a way to get Assapartemya out of Ogosto's body? What then - will there be anything of Ogosto left in there? Don't tell me: this is something new to you, too.'

Morweningart didn't nod, but it was there in her eyes.

'Your arrival here,' she said, with a trace of coldness, 'has brought many new things to our world. Enlightenment is not one of them. We are in the dark as much as you are as regards these matters.'

Benny clenched her fists. This was rapidly getting them nowhere. She'd come out here hoping to gain some answers, to find a way to beat Assapartemya. The least she'd hoped for was the support of Morweningart - but looking at it logically, there was no real reason why she should collaborate with humans that had come to plunder their world.

'Come on,' Benny said, addressing Liso - if Liso could still hear her. 'We should get back. Goddess only knows what we can do, but out here we're doing less than nothing.'

Suddenly, taking them all by surprise, the radio that had been tucked into a pocket on her leg all day beeped. Under the stares of Piotr and Morweningart, she fished it out and pressed the button.

'Anghela Maru?' It was a voice she didn't recognise - a man's voice. 'It's all over Anghela Maru,' said the man.

'What d'you mean, "It's all over"? Who are you?' She'd been thrown by his

use of her pseudonym.

'My name is Assapartemya. The base is ours. Where are you?'

'Well that's for us to know and you to find out.'

Assapartemya clearly wasn't playing her game. 'Return now and you will be allowed to live.'

'As threats go,' she replied, 'that's a bit lame, isn't it? I mean, we're doing quite well out here on our own, thanks very much. Is Bleize there? Or Tollip? I want to speak to them.'

'They are alive. Return now and they will remain alive.'

'It's flattering to know I've been missed, but why so keen on my coming back?'

'Call it neatness,' Assapartemya said - although Benny still wasn't sure he was telling the truth.

'Let me think about it.'

'Ten minutes,' said *the* voice. 'Or I start to kill people.'

And he cut the connection.

The guard now claiming to be Assapartemya placed the radio in his vest pocket as the two guards who'd chased Bleize, Benny and Piotr pushed Bleize back into the corner with Hugo and Aline.

Hugo was confused - but then so much about this whole business was confusing.

'Someone should have told you about Professor Summerfield,' Bleize said.

'Who?'

'The woman you know as Anghela Maru - that's not her real name. Her really name is Professor Benny Summerfield. She's an archaeologist.'

Assapartemya looked at her, obviously processing this new information.

'It makes no difference,' he said, turning sharply as the two guards that had chased Bleize and the other onto the roof came running in.

'What happened?' asked the 'new' Assapartemya.

'They escaped in the...' The guard seemed to struggle to find the word. 'In the scooter. Into the jungle.'

Assapartemya turned to face Bleize.

'Where did they go?'

Bleize just stared at him.

'This base,' the guard said thoughtfully, 'is *the* only way off this world, so they can't have been attempting to escape. Perhaps they are just resting whilst they plan their attack on us. Perhaps they have been...' His eyes flicked to the two new guards and Hugo felt sure that a dark smile passed between them. '...seeking assistance.'

'You can't hold us here forever,' Bleize said. 'Sooner or later someone will come looking if we don't keep up our regular communications.'

'Ahh...' said the man. He looked at Hugo. 'Perhaps you should tell her,

Hugo.'

Bleize turned to look up at him.

'Tell me what?'

Hugo's shoulders sagged.

'He threatened to kill Aline if I didn't do what he said.' Bleize wasn't sure whether what she felt for her employer at that moment was pity or disgust. He looked anything but the powerful, controlling force that Bleize always thought of him as.

'What have you done, Hugo?'

'I... I sent a message.'

'Where?'

'To Gemmeda.'

'HQ? Why?'

'He... he wanted me to send for reinforcements.'

Bleize turned back to the man holding the gun on them.

'Who the hell are you? I don't understand - why call for reinforcements?'

'I've already told you who I am - and you're not stupid: work it out.'

'But that's Assapartemya,' Bleize said, indicating the prone form of Ogosto with her boot. He'd started moaning, the punch clearly wearing off.

'That is Assapartemya,' the man agreed. 'I am Assapartemya.' He paused and smiled - and indicated the other two guards, who were smiling as well, the same, creepy smile. 'They are Assapartemya. We are all Assapartemya.'

'You're mad,' Bleize hissed coldly.

'No,' said Hugo, as realisation dawned on him. 'He's not. You're all just copies, aren't you? Your minds - they're all just copies of some original Assapartemya.'

Assapartemya - the one holding the gun on them - smiled and gave the tiniest of nods.

'What?' said Bleize.

'Think about it,' Hugo said. 'If Assapartemya's mind was encoded in that static pulse, it makes sense: what if the pulse hadn't found a host? What if it had just fizzled out in the ground? It wasn't the first pulse you'd detected, was it? Assapartemya couldn't have known that that particular one would end up in Ogosto. They had to have been copies - firing offloads of them at random, hoping for one to take. From your account of what happened at the Greenhouse, I'm willing to bet something similar happened there.' He looked Assapartemya in the eye. 'Am I right?'

'Perfectly. It makes it so much easier.' He glanced at his compatriots. 'We are all, you might say, of one mind.'

The Assapartemya at his feet moaned louder and began to move.

One of the two 'new' Assapartemyas crossed to the standing one and whispered something, nodded, and then one of them left the room.

'Now,' said Assapartemya. 'I hope you're all feeling fit - we're going for

a walk. Professor Summerfield has almost had her ten minutes: I think it's time we demonstrated our... resolve.'

'We don't have a choice,' Benny argued. 'We go back.'

'But they'll kill us,' protested Piotr.

'If we don't, he'll start killing the others.'

'But as long as we're alive, we can do something.' Piotr was starting to whine again, and Benny was getting irritated.

'What?' she snapped. 'What can we do?'

'Isn't there a transmitter on board the scooter?' he suddenly said, pointing at the scooter. 'We could send a signal offworld, ask for help.'

'Worth a try,' said Liso a little muzzily. Morweningart had withdrawn from her to allow her, Benny and Piotr to decide what to do.

Benny raced down the corridor and out into the night, returning a minute later shaking her head. 'The transmitter's just about suborbital, Joseph says, but that's it.'

'We're bugged, aren't we?' said Liso disconsolately.

'We still have the scooter,' Piotr reminded them.

'But no weapons. They've got guns and hostages - as well as superior strength and numbers. Yes, Liso,' said Benny. 'We're bugged.'

There was only one chance left, thought Hugo, realising that all his hopes for this world were dashed. He'd been stupid enough to think that a planet of trees would be no match for him - that he'd be able to mine its incredible chemical wealth, make himself immortal.

And now he'd quite probably betrayed the whole human race: ten squads of emergency troops were on their way. And what would they find when they arrived? They'd find Assapartemya - all of them - waiting and smiling and shooting them down like fish in a barrel. Ogosto was groggily clambering to his feet, looking almost amused that Bleize had managed to knock out such a big man so easily.

But Hugo's mind was preoccupied with Assapartemya's plan: when the troops arrived it was obvious what would happen - they'd be possessed by Assapartemya. Again and again and again, until he had a whole army of himself. Hundreds at first - then more. And then they'd leave and spread out, a silent, stealthy invasion. First of all, he imagined, they would go to Gemmeda - his home, his HQ. And then out into the rest of the galaxy, spreading like a plague, like a virus.

Hugo wasn't quite sure how it would work: didn't Assapartemya need his original, still inside the Tree of Life, to make copies from? Perhaps it would be enough for Assapartemya to simply lure more and more people here to be taken over. Perhaps he'd even adopt and adapt Hugo's own plan: take a Tree of Life offworld and use that to take over more and more humans, the static

pulses from its roots consuming human after human, turning them... turning them into *aliens*.

He felt sick and stupid - but more than that, he felt angry.

There was only one thing to do if he was to salvage something from this mess. Project *Evergreen*.

He wondered what Summerfield had up her sleeve - if she had anything at all. It was ironic that, had Bleize not cooked up her plan to get Summerfield to the planet, then there was a good chance that everyone here would be under Assapartemya's control by now. He was a little surprised that she hadn't already been caught and locked up with the others - but Bleize had told him how enterprising she could be. He wondered whether that was a blessing or a curse. Even if she didn't have some grand, clever plan, she might provide a vital distraction, give him the time and space he needed.

He glanced at the control console almost directly behind the Ogosto Assapartemya. There's no way he could make it here and now - but later, maybe there'd be a chance.

Hugo didn't know if it could still be done: he needed at least a few seconds at the console. There was still a chance to stop this turning from a disaster into a catastrophe.

Chapter 15

If Hugo had been able to read Assapartemya's mind - any of them - he might have felt a little less sure that his plans were about to fail.

Despite enjoying the feeling - the strength and the suppleness - of a human body, it was a constant struggle for Assapartemya to suppress Ogosto's mind. It was there at the back of his head, like someone peering over his shoulder. He could almost hear the human's voice, whispering, arguing with him - even pleading. Most of the time Assapartemya could shut it out, close a door on it so that it seemed like Ogosto was in another room. But sometimes the human's muttering rose up like a wave, threatening to drown him out, to push him out of this body. His body. It was his body now.

Its senses were weaker, more fuzzy than those of his own body: smell was wrong - as though someone had plugged his nostrils. He could smell the others in the room, and whilst their scent was not unpleasant, it was confusing, as was the scent of this place. There was a familiar odour of *green* about it - familiar, and yet disturbingly different to how he remembered it. The ceilings were high, the walls flat and regular in a way he found offensive and unnatural. Yes! That was it! This whole, artificial world, bright and scrubbed, into which he'd been reborn, was unnatural. Everything about it - from the lights to the air to the smells and sounds - had been scrubbed and scrubbed of all references to the real world. It had been hammered out into a thin, flat uniformity, devoid of all the thousand nuances and tastes and smells of outside. He hated it. Its very presence here tainted the planet. It was an infection that needed removing - but not just yet.

When he'd awakened in Ogosto's body, he'd been shocked. His instructions to the Tree had been simple enough - when the virus had been destroyed, incorporate him in a new body. A real body. But the chemical signatures of the humans had confused the Tree, and, stupid creature that it was, it had misremembered. He hadn't been expecting that his first glimpse of the world for 8,000 years would be through the tiny and inadequate eyes of an ape. How ironic. His first, panicky thought had been simply to drive the humans away from his world. But once he'd tasted Ogosto's memories, got to know his new host better, new possibilities presented themselves.

But now things were happening too quickly. This world of humans took place on a timescale unimaginably fast for him: 8,000 years in the Tree of Life had passed quickly, and now, suddenly, he'd been thrown into a world where he had to think and act faster than he'd ever done in his life. He felt tired and drained, and had almost been pleased when Bleize had knocked him out. He knew that his duplicates, the Assapartemyas that inhabited the bodies of the other humans, would continue his work, his plan. For just a few minutes he'd been able to forget all about it, and sink into sleep. He'd been disappointed

that he hadn't dreamed. Maybe humans didn't dream the same way that his people did. Assapartemya wondered, just for a moment, whether his plan would fail because of little things like that, oversights that seemed unimportant now but which would come back to haunt him later.

He pushed those negative thoughts away: he couldn't afford to start thinking like that. He had to be clear of purpose, singleminded. Hugo Tollip had come here to plunder his world, and he had to be stopped - and not just for now, for *ever*. Assapartemya had picked up much information from Ogosto's mind when he'd first taken over his body. The flow had turned to a trickle now that Ogosto had learned how to set up blocks around his memory, but Assapartemya had learned enough. Humans were rapacious, greedy, duplicitous. No matter what they said, they were not to be trusted. Hugo Tollip had promised to leave and never return, but Assapartemya knew this was a lie. Hugo Tollip - so Ogosto believed - was a man who had to be in control; a man who needed the universe to bend to his whim. There was no room for other points of view, other ways of being in Hugo Tollip's world. And Hugo Tollip hated non-humans.

If Assapartemya let him go, he would be back - with more men, more machines, more weapons - and he would stamp and stamp and stamp on Assapartemya's people until they were nothing, until they were just a green smear on the face of the planet.

'This place has digging equipment,' Assapartemya said to his copies. 'Release six of the weaker humans and use them to find it. And then take them all outside. You know what to do.'

'What d'you want digging equipment for?' asked Hugo Tollip.

'You'll see.'

Hugo Tollip fell silent, staring at Assapartemya as if, by force of his gaze, he could drive him from his new body.

'Can we use any of this equipment?' Piotr asked, wandering around the root room. Benny looked over at him and he pointed to the banks of sensors and computer whizzery that surrounded them.

'For what?'

He shrugged. 'To stop Assapartemya.'

Benny rubbed her head - but stopped when she realised she was actually rubbing the fungal patch above her ear. It felt like it had grown and the crease down the back of her ear felt sore and cracked.

'To be quite honest,' she sighed, 'I haven't a clue. We don't even know what he's planning to do. And I have to call him back in...' She looked at her watch. 'About two minutes.'

'Why does he want you, d'you think?' asked Liso. She'd gone back down into the pit and was sitting cross-legged where the root sprouted from the soil.

'Revenge?' suggested Benny. 'Neatness? Not that I've actually done anything to warrant revenge, mind you. Maybe...' She paused and narrowed her eyes. 'Maybe he thinks I'm dangerous - well, that *we're* dangerous. Out here, where he can't keep an eye on us. Why would he think that? What do we have access to that might be a threat to him?'

'The bio-weapons?'

'Maybe - but take a look in the other room and tell me you fancy playing around with those things.'

Something suddenly occurred to her.

'What was Assapartemya's man doing out at the Tree earlier? Wouldn't you have thought that he'd need all the men he could get back at the base?'

'Let me ask Morweningart,' Liso said quickly, and placed her hands on the root. 'She might know.'

Seconds later, Liso raised her head.

'Assapartemya has returned to the Tree,' she said. 'You're right.'

Benny crossed to the edge of the pit and squatted down on her haunches.

'Can you ask her why?'

Liso's eyes half closed and she gave a little jolt. Morweningart was back in town.

'Hello again Benny,' she said, almost sleepily. 'I can try to find out, but... it's not easy... not easy to intercept messages, particularly between an original and a copy. They have an affinity that blocks others out.'

'So it's the Assapartemya copy that's at the Tree, then?' Benny was surprised - she'd have expected the head honcho to be back at the base, hitting people and poking them with guns. 'Who are the others - the ones possessing the other security guards, then? Members of the Assapartemya Fan Club?'

'Sorry,' apologised Morweningart. 'I didn't think to explain - they are all Assapartemya.'

Benny frowned and pulled a face.

'What? You've lost me - oh....' Realisation dawned on her. 'All of them? Isn't that a bit...' She pulled a worried face. 'Weird?'

'Why?'

'Well, you know - there's normally just one of everyone, isn't there?'

'Perhaps for humans, yes. I admit, it's not an everyday occurrence for us, but it's not so uncommon that one of us - particularly one of the elders - should remain disincorporate in the Trees and use copies to explore the world.'

'What happens later, then? I mean... do they just go on living their lives as new individuals, these copies?'

Liso shook her head slowly.

'Not usually. Sometimes they do, but mostly they return to the Tree and are reintegrated with their original.'

'Sounds like a recipe for psychosis to me. Still, different strokes for different folks, as they say - can you try to find out what he's doing there,

then?' urged Benny. 'Please. He came back here for a reason - and he'd obviously set off before we did, so it wasn't just to catch us.'

The silence in the room was broken by the gentle bleeping of the monitors and instruments around them, responding to the connection between the Tree and Liso. Benny checked her watch: less than a minute before Assapartemya started to kill.

Assapartemya had pushed Bleize, Hugo and Aline at gunpoint out of the control room and down to the entrance hallway. Standing at the head of the ramp, looking out into the fetid darkness of the jungle, Hugo tried to work out what was going on.

Down at the foot of the ramp, it seemed like everyone in the base had been given a shovel or a piece of digging equipment. Two large sonic excavators were being operated by two of the geology team, Assapartemya's men standing by, guns readied to quell any resistance. The base's staff were arrayed in a line at the edge of the jungle, digging despondently.

'What are they doing?' Bleize demanded of Assapartemya - the Ogosto one - who stood at her side.

'They're digging for their lives,' he answered cryptically.

Bleize glanced at Hugo who just shrugged with his eyebrows.

'Meaning that if they don't you'll kill them?'

Assapartemya didn't answer. He pulled the radio from his pocket.

'Professor Summerfield?' he growled into it. 'Your ten minutes are up.'

'Doesn't time fly when you're enjoying yourself,' quipped Summerfield's tinny voice. 'I thought you'd forgotten us - you're late, you know.'

'Where are you?'

'Why does it matter?'

'Because I want to know that you are returning to the base.'

'Why? Why do you need us there?'

'To stop me killing the humans. I did tell you what I'd do.'

'Then you'll be pleased to know that we're on our way back,' Summerfield said grudgingly. 'Just try not to let your trigger finger itch too much, all right?'

She cut the connection and Assapartemya smiled thoughtfully.

'Whatever you're planning,' Hugo reminded him, 'you won't get away with it.'

Assapartemya just looked at him - a cold, withering look that made Bleize want to punch his lights out.

Then he called one of the other Assapartemyas over with a couple of shovels, thrust them into Bleize's and Hugo's hands, and told them to join in.

'It's a grave,' Hugo said quietly to Bleize as he took the shovel. 'He's getting us to dig our own grave.'

Everything inside Bleize screamed out to say no: to smack Ogosto in the face with the shovel and to try to start a riot. But she knew that she'd be dead

in seconds. And she had little confidence that trying to whip up the enthusiasm to overpower the Assapartemyas would work: it was bitterly disappointing to see how easily the base's staff had kowtowed to the Assapartemyas' demands. She'd heard that a couple of the security guards had refused and had tried to fight back - one of them had been killed, one of them tranked, his body now lying in the undergrowth at the edge of the pit.

Hugo's suggestion that they were being made to dig their own grave didn't make much sense once she started to think about it. If Assapartemya wanted them dead, he could just shoot them and leave their bodies to rot. There was only one other possibility that made sense - and in light of what Assapartemya had told them of his plans, back in the control room, it was horribly clear what he was intending to do: they were digging a pit to gain access to the roots. And once the pit was finished, all the base staff would be forced into it and another static pulse would be sent from the Tree of Life. Assapartemya would instantly have another eighty converts to his cause.

'We have to do something,' she managed to whisper to Hugo, sweating and panting at her side as he hefted a shovelful of earth behind him. 'He's going to convert us all - possess us.'

Hugo stopped digging and stared at her.

'This trench,' she said, glancing over her shoulder. 'Look - look at it. The roots! That's what it's for, to put us in contact with the roots. It's Ogosto and the Greenhouse all over again.'

Bleize wasn't sure that she'd got through to him - until his face suddenly tightened.

'Bastard!' he hissed.

'Keep digging!' one of the Assapartemyas shouted from behind him.

'What can we do?' he asked Bleize as he resumed his work.

'If I'm right,' she said, 'and he's hoping to possess us all with a static pulse, we have to be ready for it.'

'And then what?'

'We have to make sure we get out of the trench in time. At the last minute.'

'They'll be watching.'

'I know - but what else can we do? Maybe their attention will be distracted.' Bleize surreptitiously scanned the length of the pit. 'The end there, see, it's in shadow. If we can get ourselves down to that end, we might have a chance when the pulse comes.'

'Depends where they stand,' Hugo said, gesturing to the Assapartemyas with his head.

'It's our only chance,' Bleize reminded him, wiping the sweat from her forehead with her sleeve. 'If we're hit by the pulse that's it. We might as well be dead.'

The work dragged on for what seemed like hours, but Bleize realised that it had only been fifteen minutes when, away in the darkness, she heard the

sound of the scooter's rotor blades. She paused in her digging - the trench was now about two feet deep, its walls a mass of dirty, soil-encrusted roots. Just looking at them made her feel cold: she knew what was coming.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw that a few of the others had heard the scooter and had stopped working too.

'Keep digging!' snapped two of the Assapartemyas, almost in unison. Bleize sighed heavily and glanced at Hugo.

'The cavalry?' he muttered, jerking his head in the direction of the jungle.

Bleize could only hope.

'Step forwards,' boomed Assapartemya - the Mitchell Assapartemya.

Hugo squinted into the jungle, into the darkness that gathered beyond the reach of the base's lights: three dim shapes resolved themselves.

'What d'you want?' Summerfield shouted. 'Why have you brought all these people out here?'

She gestured to the base personnel, standing in the freshly dug trench. Hugo saw her note the three new bodies lying, half-buried, in the vegetation. Three more people who'd refused to dig their own graves. He didn't know whether they were alive or dead. He felt a cold rage at the thought that, after all the work he'd put in here, it was all about to be undone.

'You'll see,' Assapartemya said. He paused, and Hugo glanced up to see him narrowing his eyes. 'Who's there with you?' he shouted.

One of the three shapes in the darkness moved forwards: Liso Fortuna. She held herself slightly oddly - a posture that Hugo had come to know and to hate, her shoulders hunched, her elbows tucked in at her sides.

'An old friend of yours,' Summerfield said. 'Say hi!'

'My name is Morweningart,' called Fortuna. 'I remember you, Assapartemya. D'you remember me?'

Hugo's head was spinning: now there was another of these damned hamster things in a human body. What the hell was Summerfield playing at?

'Ahhh,' Assapartemya breathed out. 'Our self-proclaimed leader.'

'I proclaimed nothing of the sort,' countered Fortuna - or Morweningart, Hugo supposed. 'I was one of many who argued with you, with the direction you wanted to take us.'

'But your voice was always the most strident. And you had to be one of the last ones, didn't you? One of the select little band to remain behind until the end, making sure that everything went according to plan. Your plan.'

'It was always our plan,' Morweningart said with Fortuna's mouth. He felt his skin crawl at the thought of another of the aliens taking possession of a human, and the cold, hard realisation that this would be happening to all of them soon struck home. 'What alternative did you propose, Assapartemya? What choice did you offer?'

Assapartemya didn't answer.

'You whined and complained that we didn't act fast enough when the end came. But I don't remember hearing your voice, your suggestions. And remind me: did you oppose the plan to limit the apes? Did you give us an alternative?' She paused. 'No, you didn't. You were happy enough to see them wiped out then - and now what? You want to see ~~these~~ apes wiped out here and now?'

'Whilst we sat around and talked,' Assapartemya bellowed, 'our people died. We need strong leadership, we need someone who will make decisions. If we'd had that then, all those years ago, we might have found another way. Instead we just retreated into the Trees and waited. And what has that given us?'

Hugo looked up into the night, searching for a rescue that would be too late. Through the torn hole in the canopy, shrouding the planet and the atrocity about to be perpetrated from the cold gaze of the stars, he could see the empty blackness of the sky. When his backup troops arrived, as they would, there would be a warm welcome for them from Hugo and the rest of the staff - just before they discovered that Hugo and the rest of the staff were all possessed by aliens.

'It's given us life!' Morweningart continued. 'We would not be here otherwise. Our people, our culture would have died out within a generation.'

Assapartemya laughed gruffly; to Hugo it sounded like a wolf, barking. 'But now I'm going to take our culture out to the universe. The humans have been doing it for centuries - now it's our turn. You hear, Morweningart?'

Bleize glanced at Hugo and jerked her head in the direction of the darker end of the trench. They were only a few yards away from it, but Hugo could see that the spot they currently occupied was too light, too visible. If they wanted to avoid being possessed, they needed to get out of sight. Quickly.

'Even from here,' Assapartemya shouted into the distance, 'I can sense your patient, patronising, judgemental mind.'

'Who's this Morweningart?' Hugo whispered.

'One of the other hammies,' Bleize whispered at his side. 'According to Benny, Liso made contact with her when she went missing.'

'Why bring the humans into this?' called back Morweningart.

'They came to us,' Assapartemya reminded her. 'They brought this fight here. D'you know what they plan to do?'

'I know what they planned to do - they will not do it now.'

Assapartemya laughed, his harsh, barking laugh.

'If we let them go, they will return with more people, more soldiers. With weapons. We won't have the element of surprise any more.'

'You have learned a lot from them,' said Morweningart. 'Perhaps they have learned something from us: perhaps they now see that we should be left in peace.'

'Peace is not their way,' countered Assapartemya, stepping forward to the

arena's edge. 'Force and greed and conquest are their way, and yes - I *have* learned from them. They have discovered us, and we cannot be undiscovered.'

'This will destroy our civilisation.'

'This will ~~strengthen~~ our civilisation. They have taught me that sometimes, if you want something, you have to take it.'

'And then what? What is your plan now? Are you going to take all that is worst in the humans and mould us in that image?'

'Reinforcements - human reinforcements - are on their way. I will take them as I have done these five. And then more and more, until we are unstoppable.'

'Until you are unstoppable. This is not about us,' Morweningart spat. 'This is about you - about your bitterness that we would not do as you insisted. You never said so, but we knew what you wanted - to rule and control us, to impose your vision on us, your way of living. You're a spoiled child, Assapartemya, angry because the world does not spin the way you want it to.'

'Perhaps,' laughed Assapartemya. 'But then I shall make it spin whichever way I choose. Or, perhaps, not spin at all.'

'And these people here. More footsoldiers for you?'

'Of course - the first of many.'

Bleize had been right. Assapartemya hadn't brought all the base personnel out here to kill them - he'd brought them out here to possess them.

'The first of many to become you?' Morweningart almost laughed. 'I do not believe you can do that.'

'Your beliefs do not shape this new world.'

'And yours do?' Morweningart took a step forwards. Hugo could see Benny and Piotr, hovering awkwardly behind her.

'We shall see - now stay back, or I kill one of the humans.'

There was a mutter of voices from along the wall of the arena, people suddenly scared, people suddenly realising what was going to happen to them.

'Why do you need me to stay back?' asked Morweningart, taking another step towards him. 'Surely you're not scared of me, are you?'

'No, but I am learning not to trust humans. You are here at their behest, aren't you? Are you taking sides, Morweningart?'

There was a sudden movement further along the trench and the sound of voices, begging voices. Everyone turned to look: it was one of the zoology team, protesting with her workmates.

'You,' the woman shouted as she scrambled to get out of the pit, and her friends remonstrated with her that she'd get herself killed 'are just a bully!'

Assapartemya raised his gun and shot her. With a groan, she fell back into the trench and lay still, her body resting on its edge like a discarded doll.

'Ah...,' said Assapartemya smartly. 'But a bully with a gun.'

'Why?' shouted Morweningart. 'Why? Benny wanted me to force the you

that still dreams to tell us why you were doing this, what your plan was. I told her that that was not our way - to use force. You make a liar of us all.'

'I'm tired of arguing with you,' Assapartemya said abruptly. 'You have come here to trick me somehow, I sense that. And I feel the energy in the ground, my life force, ready to take these humans.' He raised his gun again. 'You will not interfere.'

And he fired.

Hugo winced as he heard the dart sputter into the night, and saw Liso clutch at her arm before sinking to her knees and keeling over.

'You two!' shouted Assapartemya. 'Summerfield and the other one. Step forwards.'

Hugo saw Summerfield and Piotr move into the light. They were too far away for him to make out the expressions on their faces, but he could see a tired resignation in the set of their shoulders.

'Why did you want us here?' Summerfield shouted. 'We're no threat to you now.'

'You're resourceful,' replied Assapartemya. He opened his mouth to say something else, but broke off, looking down at the ground. 'D'you feel that? Do you? Move closer - I want you in the pit before -'

Assapartemya stopped.

And then Hugo felt it. They all felt it: it began almost as a rumble beneath their feet, a subsonic vibration that made his eyes ache and his teeth hurt.

'Anyone who moves,' bellowed Assapartemya at the men and women in the pit, 'will be killed!'

No one moved. Hugo knew what they were all thinking: Ogosto had survived; they'd survive too. Survival, at any cost, was what it came down to. If it were a choice between living and dying, the men and women around him would choose living. Some of them would falter at the last minute, try scrambling over the edge of the pit. Maybe Assapartemya would kill them. Maybe he wouldn't. But most would do exactly as he said. That's how people were - you shouted loudly enough at them and they did what they were told. He should know.

He glanced at Bleize, her hands resting almost casually on the ground at the top of the trench. He could see how she was tensing up, ready to move. He leaned back alongside her and did the same - but even as he did, he knew he'd never make it. Fit he might be; but he was also very large. He'd never be able to heave himself out of the pit. The resignation he felt was almost comforting.

Suddenly, he felt the hairs on his arms prickle and stand on end. His beard suddenly itched ferociously. He looked up at the trees and wondered if the crackling in his ears would be the last sound he ever heard.

He was still wondering whether he'd have the strength to even try to pull himself out of the trench when the light, burst from the walls in a blinding flood, and swallowed them all.

Chapter 16

Benny blinked the tiny spangles of light out of her eyes as she felt a hand touch her shoulder, shaking her gently. There was a weight on her back and her legs, and she felt the warmth and boniness of another body, pinning her down. With a grunt, she turned her head; a sharp needle of pain sliced up into her brain and she closed her eyes again, waiting for the world to stop spinning around.

Benny coughed soil from her mouth, feeling it sticking to her lips in glutinous, muddy globs. She raised a hand to wipe it away, but found it trapped beneath something. She opened her eyes.

Benny yelped at the pain in her bum, and realised, muzzily, that she was sitting on someone's twisted foot. She moaned and fell forwards onto her knees.

Benny opened her eyes and looked at the young black guy next to her - who was staring at her in the strangest way.

'Benny?' he said, his voice croaky.

'Benny?' she replied, frowning.

The elderly woman on the other side of her tapped her on her shoulder. She had a smear of plant sap and soil down the side of her face and her spectacles were bent out of shape.

'Benny,' she said, breaking into a smile, her thin, wrinkled fingers briefly tracing the outline of her own nose and lips.

'I'm Benny,' Benny said, puzzled and disoriented.

'No,' said the woman, reaching up to straighten her glasses. 'I'm Benny.'

'No,' said the man on the other side of her. 'I'm Benny.'

And then, as the hesitancy and confusion quickly gave way to realisation and confidence, a chorus of voices rose up from the trench in which they all lay or sat or knelt.

'I'm Benny,' they laughed, all of them. 'I'm Benny!'

Chapter 17

Assapartemya stared in disbelief at the dozens and dozens of humans, all waking up from the effects of the static pulse, all talking, chattering - laughing. It made no sense, no sense at all: why were they all claiming to be 'Benny'? He glanced to his side, to where the other Assapartemyas were, similarly, looking down into the trench in disbelief, trying to understand what had happened.

They should have been htm. All of them, all possessed by his mind, encoded in the static pulse. And they should have taken longer to recover, much longer.

Assapartemya jerked his head up and stared with cold, keen eyes into the jungle.

'She did it,' he hissed, jabbing his finger out into the darkness where Liso's body lay still, like a doll thrown into the undergrowth. 'She did it!'

'Excuse me!' came an indignant cry. 'Are you deaf, or what? Who is it they're all saying they are?'

Benny - hands on hips in a peculiar pose that Assapartemya couldn't decode - and Piotr - like a puppy at his mistress's heels - strode forwards into the light. He looked down at the humans, most of whom were awake - and looking up at him, smiling muzzily. Smugly.

'How?' was all he could think of to say.

'I'll explain later,' Benny said. 'Now girls - go gettem!'

And, like a syrupy tidal wave, the humans beneath him slowly began to flow out of the trench.

Benny watched as her own little army rose up out of the ground. She winced slightly as two of the Assapartemyas raised their guns, but they were mobbed to the ground before they could fire, their reflexes dulled by shock. She couldn't help feeling a little thrill of triumph in her chest as the base personnel - the Bennys - scrabbled and clawed their way up out of the trench and over the Assapartemyas.

'Bugger!' she thought, as she realised that one of them - Ogosto, the original, the one with the best control over his host - had turned and was sprinting for the entrance to the base. Still naked, he covered the ground faster than any of the Bennys, who were still slightly dazed from the static pulse.

Surprisingly, for a man of his bulk, Hugo was up on his feet first, clambering out of the trench with a grim determination. That's my girl! thought Benny with a grin.

'He's getting away,' Piotr said beside her.

'Where's he going to go? Come on - let's get this over with.'

And she drew herself up and crashed through the vegetation to where Liso

lay, still unconscious. Piotr was at her side in seconds.

'Can you carry her?' She didn't wait for his answer. 'Good - bring her along.'

Assapartemya glanced back only once - and saw the shambling mass of humans dragging themselves to their feet. Just a few yards behind him was Hugo Tollip, making surprising speed in his direction, his eyes half closed, his face set in a rigid mask. Assapartemya glanced past him to where a few of the others had grabbed his brothers and were climbing on top of them, pinning them down with their weight. They had the guns, too. But by the time any of them had thought to use them, he was inside the main doors, slamming his hand against the control panel. With a grinding noise, the motors for the outer doors began to engage - and screeched to a halt, having only closed by a couple of feet. He pressed *the* button again and again, but nothing happened - just a loud, pained squeal from the motors. The mechanism had seized up.

Suddenly, through the gap, came a hand - Hugo Tollip's hand. Assapartemya jumped back in alarm as the hand waved around blindly, feeling for the door release. Raising his gun, Assapartemya took aim - and then a thought struck him and he lowered the gun and reached out for the door release.

With another cringe-inducing screech, the door opened, and Assapartemya grabbed Hugo's hand and dragged him in, using the man's own momentum to slam him up against the opposite wall. Keeping his gun trained on him, Assapartemya banged on the control plate and this time the door slid noisily closed, all the way.

'It doesn't matter if you kill me,' said Hugo Tollip, his voice thin and oddly inflected. 'You've lost, Assapartemya.'

'Not while I have you,' he replied. Gesturing towards *the* stairs with the gun. Hugo narrowed his eyes and stuck out his chin defiantly - but did as he was told.

'You are Benny Summerfield?' said Assapartemya as they reached the doorway.

'Good guess,' replied Hugo.

'How?'

And she told him.

'Is there anyone here,' Benny said, pushing her way through the crowd - that opened up, eerily, to let her through, 'that isn't me?'

Three hands went up - a short, fat guy, who Benny had a hard job believing had managed to get clear of the trench and the roots at the last minute, a painfully thin woman who looked totally confused, and an arm attached to a very familiar-looking body: Bleize.

'How did you manage it?' Benny asked the fat guy, looking him up and down.

But the fat man just smiled up at her and winked. 'Only kidding!'

'Don't do that,' Benny scowled as the man - as Benny - pulled an 'Ooooh!' face.

'What's happened?' asked the thin woman, looking around as though the world had gone mad. Well, it might not have gone mad - but it had gone very, very Benny.

'It's a long story,' Benny said. 'But just think of everyone here as, um...' She tailed off, realising that she didn't know how to finish the sentence in a way that would actually make things any clearer to the poor girl. 'As me.' She waved her hand vaguely into the crowd. 'Someone explain, would you? Benny,' she quipped, feeling strangely exhilarated. 'You explain. Bleize...' She beckoned her over whilst half a dozen Bennys crowded around the girl to fill her in.

'Do I get an explanation too?' Bleize asked, eyeing Benny up.

'You got out of the trench at the last minute?' Benny said.

'Let that thing blast me with a static pulse?' she scoffed. 'No way! Just kept my eye on him and when he looked away I moved.'

'Good - that's a relief. Only... well, with everyone being me for the time being, it'd probably save us some time if one of us wasn't. You'll have a better idea of how to get to Assapartemya before he does any more damage.'

'Explanation?' repeated Bleize, looking determined. Benny sighed.

'We were at the Greenhouse, in the root room, and Morweningart discovered that it was about to send out an absolutely huge pulse with Assapartemya's mind encoded into it again. One of his men had already got to the Tree to tell the original Assapartemya that he was almost ready for a pulse to be sent. It took a few seconds, but I realised what he was planning to do: put his mind into everyone on the base. A whole army of willing helpers. Morweningart tried to persuade the Tree not to send the pulse, but the Trees aren't the quickest of thinkers and it was taking too long to explain. It turned out to be easier simply to put someone else's mind into the pulse.'

Bleize nodded.

'Neat,' she said simply.

'Morweningart volunteered at first, seeing as she was already disincorporate in the Tree - but,' Benny faltered a little. 'Apart from realising that when they all came round they'd take ages to get used to using human bodies - she'd take ages, oh, you know what I mean! - I wasn't sure I could trust her to vacate them later. She seems nice enough - but I wasn't a hundred per cent convinced. So I suggested me instead - I was copied into the Tree and then into the pulse - and bingo! My own little fan club!'

'And as long as you don't get delusions of your own grandeur,' Bleize said with a raised eyebrow, 'all of those yous... what happens to them later?'

'Oh, we all go back to the Tree and they upload themselves back in there, and then back into me - and everything's hunky dory.'

'Assuming they actually want to *leave* their new hosts. I mean - look at the Assapartemyas.'

'Oh Bleize, come on! They're *me* - of course they'll want to leave. Besides, look at some of them.' She lowered her voice. 'Would you want to be stuck in some of those bodies?'

Bleize glanced around.

'Point taken.'

Assapartemya fought hard against the desire to simply shoot this human in the back of the head. So close... so close and now as far away as the stars.

But still he urged Hugo up the stairs. He didn't know what he was going to do, but he had a hostage and the door downstairs would buy him some time. He'd been right to want Summerfield and the others back here at the base. He just hadn't acted quickly enough.

'You could end this now, you know,' came Hugo's voice as they reached the first landing.

'It ends when I say, not you. Move!'

'No need to be rude,' said Hugo. 'I'm only thinking of you, you know.'

Benny - the original Benny - was glad that Bleize had escaped the Bennyfication of *the* base's entire personnel. It still didn't seem real - like they were all acting, pretending to be her. She tried to concentrate on what Bleize was telling her about the door mechanism - even Joseph was unable to open this one, claiming that the lock was more sophisticated than the locks to the bedrooms - and about other service hatches around the base; but part of her kept stealing glances, looking round at the crowd, trying to pick out her own gestures, facial expressions; she was listening to their voices - a host of strange, other people's voices - saying words that she could have imagined saying herself.

'So if we assume that Hugo is you,' Bleize said as she poked around at the bird's nest of wires dangling from the opened door control panel. 'What would be your next move?'

'Er,' said Benny. 'It's not like I've thought this all through, you know! If Assapartemya had been on time and stuck to his ten-minute deadline instead of getting carried away with digging his sandpit, none of this would have happened.'

'But if we assume that all the... all the Bennys are going to act like you -'

'Reasonable assumption,' agreed Benny.

'- then what would you do in his - her, your - situation.'

'I'd play for time, waiting for us lot to break through and come and rescue me.'

'What if he shot you as soon as you went through the door?'

'I don't think he did, though - a couple of the others saw the door open and Hugo being pulled through. Assapartemya could just as easily have shot through the gap, pushed the body out of the way, and closed the door.' Benny shook her head as Bleize tried another combination of wires. 'Maybe he doesn't know why he wants Hugo yet, but he does want him.'

Bleize got another electrical shock and swore loudly, throwing her hands up in despair.

'Not going to work,' she said grimly. 'Get some of the others to go around the outside of the base, see if any of the emergency doors or service hatches have been left open.'

Piotr raised a hand. 'How about the roof? The door might still be open.'

'And we can use the scooter to get up there,' Bleize said. 'Well done!'

Piotr positively glowed, and Benny wanted to pat his head.

With a few brief explanations to the other Bennys about trying to find other ways into the base, Benny, Bleize and Liso - still clearly a little dazed from the trunk dart, although she'd recovered surprisingly quickly - raced out of the base, jumped over the trench, and out into the darkness where they'd landed the scooter. In minutes they were up in the air and heading towards the landing pad on the roof. Piotr had seemed quite pleased that there was only room for three of them in the scooter, and had wished Liso luck with a vigorous handshake.

'Morweningart,' Benny said. 'I don't suppose you've any ideas about what Assapartemya's going to do now?'

They all swayed in their seats as Joseph piloted the scooter in for a landing.

'I don't know,' Morweningart said distantly.

Benny turned to her.

'What are you thinking - you've gone very quiet?'

'I'm thinking that it would have been better if you had never come here.'

'But you are with us on this, right? Assapartemya has to be stopped.'

'I would prefer not to be involved in using force on him. But I agree - he has to be stopped.'

'It's all about damage limitation now,' Benny said. She glanced at Bleize. 'Right Bleize?'

'Whatever it takes,' Bleize answered grimly. 'Assapartemya's finished.'

Benny nodded, although there was something uncomfortable about having Morweningart - one of the hammies - and Bleize - Tollip's right-hand woman - sitting side by side in the back of the scooter.

Quite what was going to happen when this was over she wasn't sure. When - if - they managed to bring down Assapartemya, they still had Hugo to deal with - along with the reinforcements that Bleize had told her Hugo has been forced to send for. Although, with Benny in control of Hugo's body, she didn't think there was too much to worry about: once Assapartemya had been beaten,

she could get 'Hugo' to send the troops away again, couldn't she?

But what kind of a psycho mess was she setting herself up for later? That one was going to be harder, she just knew. Eighty Bennys, each with different memories of the last few hours, all crammed back into her head. Goddess, she was going to need some expensive therapy after all this.

Joseph powered down the scooter as Benny jumped out onto the roof. The others followed, and Benny held out her hand for Joseph. He obligingly whizzed into it and she pocketed him.

In seconds they were at the tower housing the door into the base; and as they'd hoped, it was unlocked.

'Do we assume he's headed for the control centre?' Benny said. 'Morwenigart - what d'you think?'

She shook her head and looked around. 'This world of yours is so different from our own, so much more complicated.' She sounded thoroughly miserable. 'I cannot begin to guess what he'll do now. What is there left for him to do?'

Benny felt dizzy. For the fourth or fifth time she felt the blunt end of Assapartemya's gun jab into her shoulder, and she fought back the temptation just to turn around and smack him one.

Everything looked wrong; everything *felt wrong*. This wasn't the first time she'd been in someone else's body, but that business with Avril and the crystal was different: there she'd been the only mind in the bodies she'd been shunted around between. Here she was sharing Hugo's body with Hugo. It felt creepy, like she was in her room in the dark knowing that there was someone else there with her.

Repeatedly, as Assapartemya forced her up the stairs, she felt Hugo try to reassert control over his body: a weird, pressing sensation, as though someone were leaning against her on a crowded train. But she resisted, fighting him back, pushing him down. She didn't know what Assapartemya planned to do with her - presumably hold her hostage. But she was determined that Hugo wasn't going to oust her and come to some sort of deal with the hammy.

They reached the third floor - so they were heading for the control room? Hmm. The fact that she'd never been there before put her at something of a disadvantage -

'But I have!' whispered Hugo's voice suddenly, deep inside her head.

Benny gritted her teeth and forced him back into the shadows, not wanting to be drawn into a conversation with him. That, she instinctively knew, was the surest way of letting him regain control. She didn't know how it had been with those that Assapartemya had possessed: the originals had clearly been smothered by the hammy's mind. Was it a matter of how desperately the possessor wanted to keep control? Or was it down to strength of character,

willpower, all that old nonsense that people spouted when they were trying to tell you how easy it was, really, to give up smoking or drinking? As her attention wandered, she felt a surge of strength from Hugo, felt herself being shouldered aside. But she gritted her teeth and pushed back as hard as she could, and Hugo sank away into the blackness.

'In there,' Assapartemya hissed, waving his gun towards an open door.

It looked pretty much like a control room to Benny: white, bland, the walls lined with consoles and desks. It hummed faintly. Benny crossed to the far wall and turned around.

'Now what?' she said, folding her arms. She wondered whether she should try to rush him, a surprise attack that he might not be expecting. From somewhere in her head, somewhere behind her, there was a low, angry growl.

'Scared I might hurt your beautiful, buffed body?' she sneered inwardly. **'Believe me, Hugo, from where I am you could do with losing a few pounds.'** She traced the inside of her mouth, craggy and unfamiliar, with her tongue. **'And you've got a broken tooth that needs some attention.'**

'You will tell them to leave the base,' said Assapartemya, waving at the desk with his gun. Benny looked where he'd indicated: presumably, somewhere on there was a microphone or some sort of communicator.

'I will, will I? And why on this Goddess-forsaken world should I do that?'

'Because I will kill you if you don't.'

'It may have escaped your attention,' Benny said patiently, 'but I'm occupying the body of, for want of a better word, the complete bastard that started all this.' She wiggled her fingers, tucked under her arm, to prove a point. 'Waving his death around in my face isn't much of a threat, as threats go, you know.'

'There's no need for either of us to die, you know,' Hugo said quickly, and Benny could sense his panic. **'We can get through this together, you know.'**

'Just shut up and go back to wherever it is you came from,' she hissed silently. **'Let me handle this. You've done enough damage.'**

'But I can help.' Hugo's sibilant voice was disturbingly wheedling, like an internal Uriah Heep.

'The only person you want to help is yourself - now shut the scuff up and let me -'

'I have a way,' he interrupted. **'Something that he doesn't know about.'**

'Another weapon?' Benny scoffed. **'Save it - I've seen your weapons.'**

'This is different.'

'Speak to them,' said Assapartemya from behind his gun. 'Tell them to back off.' He waved the weapon pointedly.

'Pretend you're going to do as he says,' Hugo whispered. Benny tried to fight him off, but she'd been stupid - just by talking to him, she'd let him get a grip on his own body again, however briefly. She was still in control physically, but he'd started to claw his way up out of whatever dark pit he'd

been sent to when the static pulse had struck. She could feel his mental fingers, picking away at the fabric of her hold over him.

'Get out, Hugo!'

'We both want to stop him,' said Hugo. 'I have a way to do just that.'

Benny couldn't help but be intrigued. Bad idea! She screamed at herself as her interest opened up another chink in her mental armour. She felt him scrabbling away at the cracks, like a desperate spider sliding towards a plughole.

'You see the control panel there - the one with the speaker set into it?' Benny followed Hugo's directions and looked. **'That's the comms panel. But look to the right - the thumbprint scanner? Yes, that one! That's the one you need.'**

'I'm not doing anything until you tell me what it is.'

She almost heard Hugo sigh.

'It's a sonic stun-field,' he said. 'You need to put your thumb on it, and then enter a four-digit code into the keypad beside it.'

'And what will it do?'

'It will blanket the inside of the base in infrasound. We'll both be knocked out and the others will gain an hour or so to get in here before we regain consciousness.'

'How do I know you're telling the truth?'

'You don't. But if we don't do this, he'll kill us. Both of us.'

'I said-' barked Assapartemya.

'I know, I know,' Benny snapped back, out loud. **'I'm doing it, all right?'**

Grumpily, she crossed to the control console, Assapartemya scuttling sideways like a crab to keep his eye on her. Was it her imagination, or was her control over Hugo's body weakening. Hell and damnation! She swore to herself - and realised that she'd half muttered the words out loud. Assapartemya frowned at her.

'He knows something's wrong,' she whispered to Hugo in her head.

'Who's fault is that? If you'd just relax and let me...'

Benny took a deep breath, noticing again how bloody huge Hugo's hands were.

'No! Either stop trying to take over or I won't do what you want - understand? Just back off!'

There was a lessening of the pressure inside her head. Hugo clearly wanted her to do this - she didn't like to even think about how close he'd come to regaining control.

'What d'you want me to say?' she asked Assapartemya out loud.

'Tell them to move away from the base - beyond the trench.'

For a moment, Benny expected him to change that, and to have her direct everyone into the trench so that he could try his brainwashing trick again. But she reckoned he needed to give some kind of signal to the Tree, and for that

he needed access to the roots themselves - or to someone out there *at* the Tree. She remembered that he still had a man out there. If he really wanted to, he could probably try the same routine again.... Nah, she thought dismissively. Wouldn't work this time: there was no way that all of her other selves would go clambering into that pit. And Assapartemya knew it.

Benny spread out her hands on the console and frowned theatrically.

'It's been locked out,' she said, looking up at him with a furrowed brow.

'What has?'

'The comms panel.'

'Hugo Tollip!' spat Assapartemya, gripping his gun tightly and waving it around. Benny hoped he had better control of his body than she felt she had of hers.

'Ah, but this is his body,' Benny reminded Assapartemya. 'I can use his fingerprint to undo the lock.'

Assapartemya's face went blank for a moment as he processed the information. Finally he nodded.

'Do it!'

'Good girl,' whispered Hugo. Benny shivered - this was creeping her out. **'That's it - put your finger on the scanner. Now enter seven-seven-nine-one.'**

...an image of a cylinder, a metal cylinder, hovering in the near-darkness of...

Benny jumped, physically.

'Just concentrate,' Hugo said, his voice steady and level. **'Just enter the numbers. Seven...'**

...fastened to a tank with thin metal fins all over it, ribbed like some sort of radiator...

'What's happening?' Benny moaned out loud, a cold knifeblade of pain sliding in behind her eyes.

'Seven, Benny. Seven. Press the seven.'

She ignored him as another flash of light flared in her head -

...a valve and a tube, leading into the air conditioning unit...

'Where's this coming from?' she said. **'What am I seeing?'**

'It's nothing.' Hugo's voice was hard and determined, and she felt her hand moving of its own volition towards the keypad. Hugo, pressing right up against her in the sweaty darkness of her own head, gave a cold chuckle. It felt like his fingers were gripping her wrist, moving it slowly and purposefully. **'That's a good girl,'** he said. **'Let me back... it'd be so much easier for you. No more struggling. You know there's only one way it can end, don't you?'**

...a cylinder, full of something.... Something to be pumped into the air conditioning system...

'This isn't an infrasound weapon!'

'Just press the buttons!'

And then another image sprang into her mind, straight from Hugo's: the pig in the tank, out at the Greenhouse. Furred over with mould, its milky white, sightless eyes blinking pathetically. And a name - two words. Project

Evergreen.

'The spores!' she shouted - out loud again, but she barely noticed that Assapartemya had raised his gun to her. **'You're going to pump those spores into the air! You bastard! You've seen what they do....'**

'Ahhh, but not to me, Benny. You don't think I'd be stupid enough to equip my base with a, shall we say, *failsafe* device and not develop an antidote for myself, do you?'

'But you'll kill everyone! Liso, Piotr - even Bleize!'

She felt him move her hand again again, back towards the number pad.

'Casualties of war,' Hugo said. **'Or should that be casualties of commerce?'** He laughed hollowly. **'The same thing, really. Now just enter the numbers and we won't have to worry about Assapartemya again.'**

She stared down at her hand as her finger lighted on the number seven. Her whole arm - Hugo's arm - twitched and trembled as she tried to stop herself pressing the key. But he was now as strong as her.

'Me and you - we'll survive Benny. And staff are ten-a-penny. Clear all this mess aside and start again! And this time I'll get it right!'

As Benny's finger moved to the next button, she realised what he meant: wipe the base clean of everyone, pump *the* spores into the air and watch them die, all of them, and then sit and wait for his troops to arrive so that he could begin the whole, sickening thing all over again.

'No,' she said grimly. 'No!'

As they reached the third-floor exit, Benny led the way into the corridor with her finger on her lips. She wasn't quite sure what further damage Assapartemya could do, but she didn't want to give him any more advance warning of their presence than she could avoid.

As she peered around the corner into the corridor that Bleize had indicated held the control room, she saw movement at the far end - and realised that the others, the other Bennys, had managed to get in. They must have found some back stairs or another accessway to this floor. As if they were waiting for her, they stood in silence and waved. Benny began to realise why Assapartemya had been so keen to have an army of himself: it was so much easier than trying to organise an army of other people. Everyone was of the same mind - they had the same goals, the same tactics, the same priorities. It was like having all your best friends round to play and them all playing just the games you wanted to play. Benny shivered: Don't get ~~used~~ to this, she warned herself as she waved back. As soon as this is over, they're all going back to the shop.

'He has a gun,' Bleize reminded her, grabbing her arm as she headed for the control room. 'And he probably has it aimed right at Hugo's head.'

'I know. And what part of 'aimed at Hugo's head' am I supposed to give a damn about?'

'It's not just him,' Morweningart interjected. 'Remember? You're in there, too.'

But that was just a facsimile of her - not the real thing at all. She was the real thing. How much was she supposed to care about a quick photocopy of herself, shoved into someone else's body?

As if she'd read her thoughts, Morweningart said: 'She's as real as you are, Benny. And if she isn't, then none of us is - none of us stored in the Trees of Life is real. If you care about saving us, then you should care about her too.'

Yeah, right. The others - the one in Hugo, the other eighty-odd scattered around the base - they were all just... The words 'pale imitations' leaped into her head. Morweningart would say that, wouldn't she? That's what she was too - just a copy of the original. The Benny in Hugo knew that; the Bennys in all the others knew that - there could only be one original.

Philosophy could wait, she decided - sorting out Assapartemya and Tollip couldn't. She touched the doorplate.

Assapartemya was lost.

Even before the door slid open and *the* humans rushed in, he knew he was lost.

Trying to get Hugo Tollip - or Benny Summerfield, it hardly mattered which - to send everyone out of the base had been an act of desperation; an act of

someone with nowhere else to go. Assapartemya had hoped it would buy him some time, time to think... It hadn't even bought him that. A worthless currency, just like everything the humans offered.

He stared at Hugo Tollip, his hand hovering, twitching, over the control panel. It was as though he were struggling with himself - and then Assapartemya realised that the struggle was between Benny Summerfield and Hugo Tollip, two minds trying to control one body. In the back of his own head, he heard Ogosto mutter something, but he ignored it.

He felt stupid - stupid to think that he, one person, could have hoped to make any difference. His people had attempted to control nature and had almost wiped out everything. Now the humans were here and they were doing exactly the same. Perhaps that was the most depressing thing: that his people and the humans were, at heart, not very different.

One moment he'd had everything - control of the base and a potential army of humans. And now nothing. This world of humans was unfathomable - fast, cold and unfathomable.

'Put down the gun,' said the original Summerfield as the others entered behind her.

He looked at the gun in his hand - they would kill him, he knew. He was an alien, regardless of the body that clothed him. An alien on his own world.

Hugo Tollip jerked in his seat, his hand still poised over the control panel.

'You did this,' Assapartemya said coldly. 'You brought all of this to our world. Why could you not leave us in peace?'

He looked into Hugo Tollip's eyes. And just for a moment was something there that he didn't understand, something he hadn't seen before. Was he getting better at reading their body language, their facial expressions? It almost seemed like the man was saying...

And then shakily Hugo stumbled to his feet, one arm still outstretched as if forgotten.

'Hugo!' shouted Bleize, taking a step towards the man, but Summerfield held her back.

Assapartemya saw Hugo Tollip glance round the room, briefly, as if looking for someone, a curious look on his face. And then he turned back to Assapartemya and took a breath - and lunged towards him.

Assapartemya locked eyes with the man who had brought such ruin to his world, brought up his gun, and fired.

The first shot blasted straight through Tollip's chest, burning a flickering hole in the back of his shirt.

Everyone in the room stared at the body as it fell - unprepared for the second shot, the one that tore straight through Ogosto's temple, blowing away the back of his head. With a heavy, sickening thump, he collapsed against the wall and slid down, smearing the grubby white wall with red. The gun fell from his fingers and clattered to the floor.

Benny froze, too stunned to take it all in.

Hugo's dead, she thought. Ogosto's dead. Assapartemya's....

'Benny!' she cried, dropping to her knees beside Hugo's body.

He was still alive, his body twitching spasmodically as he tried to speak. There was a smoking, charred patch on his chest, and froth of blood bubbled at the corners of his mouth, matting his beard. She tried to lift his head as he opened his eyes.

'You'll be fine,' Benny said, searching his face for signs of something familiar. She wasn't looking for Hugo, whether he was there or not. She was looking for herself, the realisation only just having dawned that Assapartemya had shot her. Tears pricked at her eyes and she snuffled them back, feeling stupid. It was only a copy, after all.

'Yes,' croaked the big, bearded Benny in her arms. 'Holes in chest...' She coughed up more blood. 'Good for breathing.'

And then her body sagged in her arms, and it was nothing more than a shell - the shell of a man who had deserved to die, and a woman who hadn't.

Chapter 20

From the control room, Benny could hear shouts and hoots, a joyous symphony of smashing and crashing and destruction.

It should have made her happy, knowing that her other selves had kept themselves together for long enough to go on a mad rampage and trash every bit of research, every computer, every printout that they could find.

It should have made her glad that the hammies were safe from Tollip and could go about the business of recreating their society and putting the planet back to how it once was.

But she now had to work out how they were going to explain all of this: right now, Tollip's troops were on their way here. And when they arrived, they'd find Tollip's base smashed up, Tollip's research destroyed, some of Tollip's staff dead and Tollip's bio-weapons research in flames.

Oh, and Tollip's body.

Tricky one, that.

Bleize, much as Benny expected, was pacing her room.

'We need to talk,' Benny said.

'Indeed we do,' Bleize said, motioning for her to come in.

Her room looked as though it hadn't been used. It even smelled as though it hadn't been used. Benny hovered near the bed, not sure whether she dared sit on it. Bleize didn't even seem to notice.

'How long until they arrive?' she asked - no preamble, no social niceties. That was Bleize.

'About eight hours.'

'And then what?'

Bleize stopped her pacing, folded her arms, and tipped her head back slightly.

'And then we tell them something that keeps everyone happy.'

Bleize pursed her lips and gave a thoughtful nod before stretching herself out on the bed in a most un-Bleizelike display of relaxation.

'And you've already worked out what that's going to be?'

'That's why I'm here.' Benny took a deep breath, realising that they could be dancing around each other until the cows came home - or, indeed, until the troops arrived.

'You've come to make a deal.'

Benny nodded cautiously. 'Something like that. What were you thinking of?'

'I'm not blind, Professor Summerfield, and I'm not stupid. There have been things going on here that... well, would not reflect well on either Hugo, myself or his business empire if they were to be made public.'

'That's one way of putting it.' Benny tried hard not to sound too gloaty.

'And upstairs, along with Hugo's body, we have Ogosto's. And a gun with Ogosto's fingerprints on it.' She raised an enquiring eyebrow. Benny gave the tiniest of nods - she could see where this was going. 'The stress and strain of working here,' continued Bleize, as if she were outlining a plot for a murder mystery dinner party, 'got to him. The heat, the humidity. And when he found the Greenhouse...' She gave a sad shake of the head. 'He just flipped. Went mad - burned the place down and came after Hugo. We tried to stop him, but....' She looked Benny in the eye sharply. 'Happy?'

'That's not the word I'd use... but... satisfied, I think will do. And what d'you want from all this?'

'To be left to get on with my career and with my life.'

Benny noted which one came first.

'And d'you think your career will ever bring you back here?'

'This planet is a waste of resources,' Bleize said, as if reading from an official report she hadn't yet written. 'Unviable for colonisation and with inadequate natural resources to make exploitation feasible.'

'You write these things a lot, do you? That was pretty bloody word perfect, Bleize.'

'Today,' said Bleize steadily, 'I lost an employer and a job. There's been nothing perfect about today.'

Benny knew that most of the base's staff would still remember what Tollip had found here, regardless of whatever memory-messing her copies had inadvertently done. The Bennys all tried - or so they said - to talk to the people whose bodies they'd borrowed, to persuade them a catastrophe had been averted and that they should never, ever talk of this again.

They'd fail.

Benny knew that. Human nature, human curiosity, would win out. Sooner or later, someone would blab. And someone would return here. Maybe Bleize, maybe one of Tollip's scientists. But by then, Morweningart assured her, they'd be met by a whole new generation of hammies. By then, the planet would be officially inhabited and ownership of it by humans would no longer be an option. And a few subtle mentions that the planet was home to a virus capable of wiping out any unruly apes that set foot there should do the trick.

She found it hard to care, just at the moment. She just kept coming back to Tollip - to the Benny that had been inside him when Assapartemya had shot him.

To see yourself die. Even when it wasn't yourself - when it was a six-foot-something bear of a man that you were just borrowing for a while. It wasn't right. Benny remembered someone telling her that a parent should never have to bury their child. It felt like that. Over and over, as she sat alone in the control room, Benny replayed those final few moments, the look that Tollip -

that she - had given herself. Was she reading more into it than was actually there? Was she attributing some noble, self-sacrificing instincts to something that was just a facsimile of herself?

No, thought Benny. She knew what she was *doing*. I knew what I was *doing*. I wanted Assapartemya to shoot me, to kill *Tollip*, didn't I? If all the Bennys were of one mind, though, why was it so hard for her to accept that that's what she would have done. There's no *proper language* for this kind of *thing*, is there? She, I... us. Much as she liked to think of herself as a good guy, could she honestly say that she would have sacrificed herself to make sure that Tollip couldn't do this all over again? Perhaps Morweningart had been wrong; perhaps the copies weren't identical to *the* originals; perhaps they saw themselves as something different, something less, something more disposable. The thought was a strangely miserable one.

Benny sighed as another crash sounded from somewhere on the floor above. She'd find out what the other Bennys thought soon enough. There was one hell of a family reunion coming up.

Piotr was finding it hard to get his head around the fact that, despite appearances, almost everyone else in the base was Benny. They looked the same as they always had, they walked the same as they always had (mostly). Even their voices weren't actually that different to how they'd always been. Liso said it was because he wasn't tuned in to *people*. He didn't understand what she meant, and told her so. She'd just shaken her head sadly and gone back to smashing things up.

He watched a group manhandling *the* other Assapartemyas, their hands tied behind their backs, out of *the* store rooms. Perhaps it didn't matter who anyone was 'in their heads' - maybe it only mattered how they came across to others. Did that make all those others really Benny, or just people who thought they were Benny? He felt certain there were mental institutions full of people who thought they were Albert Einstein. What did *that* prove? Just believing you were someone didn't make you that someone.

And he wasn't convinced, despite Morweningart's belief, that the Assapartemyas would willingly go back into the Trees of Life and vacate their hosts. But if the alternative was facing years in prison in their stolen hosts, he supposed that they'd make a sensible choice.

Janny, one of the computer support people, came bounding down the corridor and asked him if he fancied a trip out to the Greenhouse to do some serious arson. He was a little bit thrown: he'd noticed Janny before, thought she was all right in a wild, partyish sort of way. He couldn't work out why she'd be asking him to go along with her - until he remembered that it wasn't Janny asking him, it was Benny. He gave a shrug - there wasn't much else for him to do while they waited for Tollip's people to arrive and Bleize to lie to them. All the documentation necessary to get her into very hot water had been

sent off to Benny's friend Irving Braxiatel, so Benny wasn't expecting a last-minute change of heart by Bleize.

Half an hour later, the two of them - along with a couple of others - arrived at the Greenhouse, and set about placing some seismic charges around the place. A quick scout around revealed a store room full of big, square plastic containers of frighteningly inflammable chemicals which they positioned at what seemed strategic positions.

'So what're you going to do when this is all over?' Janny (yes, he knew it was really Benny, but it was easier to think of her as Janny) asked, coming out of the root room.

'Plenty of agency work around,' he said, grunting as he dragged a tank of something hazardous - and probably carcinogenic - down the corridor into the room with the pig-in-the-tank. She came over to help him. 'You?'

'Oh, back home for a while,' she said, wiping her sweaty face as they finished positioning it.

'It's all going to seem a bit tame after this, isn't it?' He said and paused, remembering that this was Benny he was speaking to. 'Maybe not for you, but for us mere mortals.'

She raised an eyebrow at him.

'I'd say you'd been pretty much not-very-mere-at-all over these last couple of days,' she said.

He frowned.

'Not exactly the dashing man of action, though, am I?'

'There are other ways to be heroes.'

'If you're trying to be nice to make up for leaving me in the tunnel,' he said warily, 'you don't need to, you know.'

'It was a bit of a crap thing to do, though.'

He gave a shrug.

'It was a bit of a crap thing to do to trick you into coming here.'

He looked around awkwardly for something else to move, and heard the sounds of people oohing and aahing as they opened cages in the next room. At the suggestion of one of the life sciences team, they'd decided to release the small stock of test animals. Not the pig, because it was dead now; and not the vacant-eyed monkey, because something had been done to it and it clearly wouldn't have left its tank even if the door had been opened and someone had been poking it with a stick. But there was a whole room of rats and monkeys and pigs - and some not-quite-so-normal things that, disturbingly, seemed to have characteristics of all of them. Special test animals - bred, Piotr had been told, to simulate human responses. It made him feel queasy.

'You went along with Bleize because you were worried about Liso, remember?' Janny said, resting a hand on his shoulder. He flinched as if she'd hit him.

'Not sure she appreciates it, though.' He shook his head. 'I always seem to

manage to pick the ones that don't even notice I'm around.'

Janny gave a little laugh.

'And you don't notice the ones that are right under your nose.'

He looked at her. She was smiling. In one of those ways.

'What?'

'Oh come on, Piotr!' Janny said, taking his hand in both of hers. 'D'you need it spelling out?'

'Benny!' Piotr almost shrieked, pulling his hand away.

Janny rolled her eyes and held up her hands in a mock surrender.

'D'you wanna know a secret?' she asked with a wink. 'Benny's gone - back in there, in the root room. She went back into the Tree. So now it's just you and me, Piotr.'

'Oh God,' he said, backing up against a desk as Janny advanced on him.

'What about the explosives and the... ah... er... blowing the place up?'

Janny grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him closer so her face was just inches from his.

'I'm sure we can manage a bigger bang than that.'

The base was a mess.

Benny found Piotr and Liso sitting in the refectory in awkward silence, listening to the sounds of Benny's vandalism. Liso had dark shadows under her eyes and Piotr still hadn't shaved. At least the stubble gave his face a bit of colour. Most disturbing of all was the inane grin plastered across his face. He'd had it since he came back from the Greenhouse, but he'd refused to explain what he'd found out there that was so funny.

'How's Morweningart?' Benny slipped into a chair alongside him.

'Sleeping.' She gave her a tight smile.

'She's okay?'

Liso nodded.

'And how did your trip to the Greenhouse go?' she asked Piotr.

He smiled broadly - and Benny realised that it was probably the first time she'd seen him smile properly since she'd been here. Nice. Strange, but nice.

'Bang,' he said, smirking like a schoolboy. 'Um, some of the chemicals they kept there are very explosive,' he stammered in answer to their frowns. 'But not the only explosive things here.' He smiled again. 'They've started arguing, you know,' he added, awkwardly changing the subject.

'Who?'

'You,' he said to Benny. 'All of you. Started out as a discussion about whether blowing up that tank with the pig in it would release the spores. I had to separate three of you.'

'Really?'

'Two of them started with the hair-pulling and name-calling,' Piotr said, clearly relishing his tale. 'The third one waded in to tell them to grow up and

they turned on him.'

Benny pulled a face.

'Imagine what this place would have been like if Assapartemya had won, then. Eighty of him, bickering and squabbling. What?'

Liso had raised an eyebrow.

'You're assuming,' she said, grinning, 'that there's something inevitable about copies diverging. That the same thing would have happened to him as to you.'

'What are you saying?'

Liso put on a butter-wouldn't-melt face.

'Nothing - just that it might be more about you than about them just being copies of each other!'

'Your point being...?'

'Maybe Professor Bernice Summerfield isn't quite as sorted as she likes to think she is.... Maybe under that cool, sound exterior there are hundreds of mad little Bennyettes struggling to get out...'

Benny narrowed her eyes.

'And to think,' she said. 'I came all this way to rescue you. And that's the thanks I get - amateur hour on the shrink's couch.'

'I think,' Liso said knowingly, 'that you came all this way to prove a point. This Ms Jones is going to have a field day when you get back, if she's half as bad as you've said she is.'

Oh balls, thought Benny. Ms Jones. Whoo-hoo.

'Maybe you're right,' she finally agreed. 'But I know one thing I do want: I want to get back and see my son. All eighty of me.'

How do you cope with eighty different points-of-view of the same events, all being crammed back into your head?

D'you go mad? D'you retreat into some inner world where there's only one, and where you don't have to see yourself from eighty different angles (boobs better than she'd expected, bum looking a little bit slack, good posture though - but a very irritating voice when she got narky)? Or do you just laugh it all off and pretend that yours is the only true viewpoint? That you know better and that everyone else is just deluded? Or was that the path to turning into Hugo Tollip, or Assapartemya?

Benny didn't know. She wasn't in the mood for psychoanalysis right now. When she got home, she'd get Brax to pay for someone to do it properly - if she ever needed it. Let's face it, she thought as she squeezed herself into the transport shuttle back to Dali Prime, she'd survived worse than this in the past - and there would probably be worse to face in the future. Morweningart had told her that the copies could stay in the Tree of Life, but that seemed... lazy, somehow. Dump them there on the planet of the hamsters, forget about them. Like putting old people in homes when it got a little bit inconvenient to

have them around. They might only be shades of herself, but Benny felt she owed it to them to take them with her. Probably storing trouble up for herself in the future, but at least now there was a future. A nice, comfortable future, back on the Collection, with all her friends and family around her. A future - at least for the time being - that didn't involve being shot at, chased, locked up, tortured, hurt or terrified. A future with wine and chocolate and Peter and clean towels and a shopping trip to buy some new knickers.

Benny slept for most of the journey, against all expectations. One of Tollip's doctors gave her something for her cauliflower ear, some vitamin shots and a change of clothes. Considering that they were expecting a fully working scientific base under the command of the man who paid their wages, they were surprisingly unfazed by the chaos that greeted them. The military mindset. What a wonderful thing.

Bleize had stepped in and taken charge - and never spoke to Benny again. She could live with that as long as Bleize did as she'd said she do, and didn't try to wriggle out of it. Of course, for all she knew, Bleize could be planning -

Oh, for Goddess' sake, thought Benny. Just let it go. It's over.

Not the cleanest, most beautifully wrapped-up of endings she'd known, but the death toll could have been worse. And Liso and Piotr, if not star-crossed lovers, had at least found common cause in helping the base personnel sort themselves out ready for evacuation. She'd invited them to the Collection to meet Peter and her little extended family, and Liso had seemed genuinely pleased at the offer, Piotr less so. He seemed anxious to find Janny, for some reason - probably so's the two of them could bitch about her. She'd never really liked that Janny.

And Morweningart..

After everyone had traipsed out to the trench in front of the base like happy schoolkids on an outing, and all the Bennys had transferred themselves back into the Tree and then back into her, she'd stayed behind to talk to Morweningart. It hadn't been easy, keeping her mind on things, with eighty different sets of memories all jiggling and milling around in her head, like the biggest ever nest of baby birds all wanting to be fed.

Once again, they were in the dream, in the fairy woodland - how the planet used to be before the Trees were left to go a bit doolally. Benny felt sure there was a lesson in there somewhere, but she was buggered if she could work out what it was.

'We'll restore it,' Morweningart said. 'Put it back to how it was. Before the virus killed everything, we rescued cells from some of the animals. We can grow new ones, repopulate our world. And we have some of your animals, too, from the Greenhouse. If they survive, it'll be interesting to see what happens to them.'

Another hammy came trotting across the grass, raised up on all four of its little legs. As it reached Benny and Morweningart, it gave a bounce and sprang

up on its back ones.

'Assapartemya,' Benny said, knowing instantly who it was.

'Still here?'

'Not for long.'

The shock of his presence felt almost like a physical slap: here she was, faced with the person who'd killed her. She ought to be angry, outraged; she ought to hit him.

'My copies told me what happened,' he said, his voice softer and more gentle than she'd expected. The Assapartemya she'd known had been raving - angry that his planet had been stolen by humans. This one was curiously calm. He stared at her with huge, indigo eyes.

'You got what you wanted - what you wanted before you went totally mad,' she said, trying to drum up some antipathy towards him, but it just wasn't there. Perhaps she was mellowing; perhaps it was something to do with having to reintegrate all the different Bennys, the different viewpoints. Or maybe she was just tired and wanted to go home.

'So did you.'

'I didn't want half a dozen people dead and to see myself commit suicide.'

'And I didn't want to see my people sold into slavery or erased for the benefit of your kind.' He spat the last two words. 'You said "before I went totally mad". Have you given any thought to why that happened?'

'Are you going to give me excuses now?'

'Not excuses - but perhaps explanations. Ask Morweningart: there's no love lost between us, but ask her if she would ever have expected this from me?'

'I don't need to ask her anything. I know what you did. And what you tried to do.'

'Only once I took over a human body.'

'You're blaming Ogosto for turning you into a megalomaniac? You've got a bloody cheek!' Benny only just stopped herself from punching him - even though it was hard to reconcile the Assapartemya she'd known and hated with this softly spoken green and purple hamster.

'Ask yourself,' Assapartemya said softly, blinking his huge eyes at her. 'Why did the copy of you in Hugo Tollip force me to kill them? She chose me over him - hammy over human. She knew. You knew. Humanity is a disease.'

Benny turned away, feeling angry, dirty. She hadn't expected an apology for killing her copy. But she hadn't prepared herself for this.

'Don't come back,' Assapartemya said, but there was little animosity in his voice. He dropped to all fours, and walked away.

'There will be changes here,' Morweningart said at her side.

'Not too many, I hope,' Benny said, gazing out on soft, rolling woodland where hammies chattered and squeaked and played. They were like children, she thought. Children suddenly forced to grow up because adults had decided

they wanted to build a multi-storey carpark in their sandpit.

Again she thought of Peter and for no real reason she began to cry.

They were there to welcome her when she stepped off the shuttle from Dali Prime. Jason, Adrian - even Brax. She tried not to trip down the steps in her haste to be back with them, and was pleasantly reassured to see how worried they all looked.

'Benny!' said Jason as she dropped her bag on the ground, threw caution to the wind and flung her arms around him. 'Where the bloody hell have you been?'

She stepped back and smiled.

'Missed you too, honey. Good day at the office?'

'Benny-'

'I'm sorry Jason - Adrian, Brax. I know I should have told you where I was going.' She rolled her eyes, feeling almost giddy. 'But you know what I'm like - have mission, will travel. Still.' She looked around at them as a teacher might do at her favourite class. 'You've no idea how good it is to be back - although, to be quite honest, it's a bit nippy. Brax, you couldn't have a word with climate control...'

'Benny!'

Jason's sharpness made her flinch.

'Look, I've said I'm -'

'That doesn't matter,' said Brax smoothly, taking her hand. 'As long as you're safe.'

'We were worried,' Jason said. 'You could at least have told us where you were going, you know.'

'I've only been gone three days.'

'Nearer four,' Adrian commented dourly.

'I'm sure you've coped.' Benny picked up her bag. 'Peter not been too much trouble?' She threw an arch look at the two of them.

'He's been fine,' Jason said. 'Ms Jones has been, um, helping out.'

Benny stopped dead.

'Ms Jones?'

Jason pulled one of those evasive faces, and Benny turned to Adrian, who was doing a very convincing impersonation of him.

'You know what she's like,' he protested. 'Once she sets her mind on something.'

'Hmm,' said Benny thoughtfully - but not at all convinced. 'Where is he?'

He was, as she'd suspected, in Ms Jones's office, romping around the floor and making goohing and gaahing noises over a couple of sparkly balls that were trundling around, seemingly with a life of their own. Ms Jones looked up from Peter as Benny came in.

'Ah,' said Ms Jones. 'Benny.'

There was something in her eyes that Benny couldn't quite read - a flash of guilt, maybe? A glimmer of not-sure-quite-what-to-say-now awkwardness?

'Thanks,' said Benny - almost surprising herself.

Ms Jones nodded.

'Come on Peter - let Auntie Clarissa give you back to mummy.' Ms Jones knelt down and in a huge, swooping gesture gathered him up in her arms and passed him over to Benny (making Benny feel very strange - and not in an even vaguely good way) where he proceeded to poke her in the eye and giggle at the same time.

'Mummy loves you too,' she said, peering at him through the other one and trying to hold it out of range of his questing fingers.

'Good trip?' enquired Ms Jones, picking up Peter's toys (Benny noticed that, scattered around the room, there were rather more of them than she might have expected: had Peter and Adrian looked after Peter *at all* while she'd been away?) and popping them into a couple of huge canvas bags.

'I've had better.'

Ms Jones caught sight of the remains of the fungal infection around her ear. Benny could see her slipping into disapproval mode.

'It's not infectious,' she said defensively.

'Good. You know how easily children pick things up,' she said.

And what did that mean? Benny wondered, feeling a flash of anger.

'Benny,' she said, as Peter started to wriggle around in her arms, trying to see where his sparkly balls had gone. 'Please don't think I'm trying to interfere or tell you how you should bring Peter up....'

Ah, thought Benny, her jaw tightening. But that's exactly what you're about to do, isn't it? You, a woman without children, a woman who -

Benny cut herself off, mid-thought. Where the Goddess had that come from? Her thoughts had been hurtling towards Ms Jones's 'collaboration' with the Fifth Axis, something she thought she'd worked through a long time ago. She felt a sharp pain, just behind her eyes, and, for a moment, there was a whispering chorus of voices in her ears. No words, just mutterings. She knew what it was - she was still coming to terms with having eighty different Bennys in her head. And despite her earlier belief in their unanimity of thought, she was realising that that just wasn't the case.

'Then don't,' she snapped back at Ms Jones. Peter gave a yelp and Benny realised that she was squeezing him too tightly. She caught the look on Ms Jones's face and wanted to slap her.

'If you need to get some rest...'

'I don't need to get some rest, thank you.'

'I'm just saying, if you need me to look after -'

'I can look after my own son perfectly well, thank you, Clarissa. And if I need any help, well, he's got Adrian and Jason, hasn't he?'

Ms Jones pulled a tight little face.

'Peter's at a very impressionable age. He needs good role models around him - people who he can look up to, emulate. People he can aspire to be like.'

That was it. The last straw. If she hadn't been carrying her son, Benny *would* have slapped her. She didn't care how much Ms Jones had been through, or how close Benny thought they'd become recently, it was clear that she'd been wrong about her: friends don't talk like that about you, don't insult you and certainly don't cast aspersions on your abilities as a parent. Like she'd know how to bring up a child.

For a long, silent moment, Benny glared at her, feeling the colour rush to her cheeks. Ms Jones held her gaze until Peter finally burped.

'Bedtime,' she said simply, addressing the comment more to Ms Jones than to Peter. 'Mummy's going to read you a story. How d'you fancy the one about the wicked witch, eh, sweetheart?'

Peter gurgled and tried for the other eye.

This, thought Benny as she closed the door on Clarissa Jones's expression, is not good.

Not good at all.

Acknowledgements

Thanks, as ever, to Mike Robinson, Simon Forward and Paul Dale Smith for their cruel yet insightful comments.

And *to Gary Russell* for his patience and kind words - and *for asking me to contribute to Benny's life story* in the first place.

I'll *get my own* back on them all one day!

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